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~~Walter Kohn~~

NAS

The track could plainly be seen but the trail ended abruptly.

AFLOAT;

or,

Adventures on Watery Trails

BY

CAPTAIN ALAN DOUGLAS

SCOUT MASTER

M. A. DONOHUE & COMPANY

CHICAGO :: NEW YORK

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C.D. ... OCT 28 1940

ON WATERY TRAILS

CHAPTER I

THE RAIL BIRDS HEAR SOME NEWS

"Elmer said we'd take a vote on it!"

"Yes, and tonight the next regular meeting of the Hickory Ridge Boy Scout Troop is scheduled to take place, so we'll soon know where we stand."

"Thith hath been a pretty tame thummer for the cwowd, all told, don't you think, Lil Artha?"

"It certainly has, as sure as your name's Ted Burgoyne. Our camping out was cut short, for with so many rainy days we just had to give it up."

"Yeth, after three of the fellowth came down with bad cases of malarial fever. The mothquitoes were so plentiful."

"That was some news to me to find out that a certain breed of mosquitoes are the only ones that give you the malarial poison when they smack you."

"Huh! I used to think all that talk was a silly

yarn, too, Toby, but now I put a heap of stock in the same," declared the unusually tall and thin boy, who seemed to answer to the queer name of "Lil Artha;" he had evidently been dubbed so by his comrades as an undersized cub, and when shooting up later on had been unable to shake off the absurd nickname.

"But here we've still got a couple of weeks left of our vacation, you know," remarked the chap called Toby, "and it'd be just a shame to let the good old summer time dribble away without one more whack at the woods, and the open air life we all love so well."

"Toby, jutht hold your horthes!" exclaimed the one who lisped so dreadfully, and whose name was Theodore Burgoyne, though seldom called anything but Ted; "you let Elmer decide for the crowd. I'm dead certain he'll lay out a joyouth plan at the meeting tonight that'll call for the unanimous approval of every member of the troop to be found in thith sleepy town these dog days."

"Hear! hear! Ted has got it down pat, let me tell you!" cried Toby Jones, who in the bosom of his family was occasionally reminded that he had once upon a time been christened Tobias Ellsworth Jones.

"Yes, you know our faithful and hard-working patrol leader to a dot, Ted," added the long-legged scout, with a wide grin on his thin and freckled face. "Trust Elmer Chenowith to think up a programme that will meet with universal approval. But this is a pretty warm proposition for a late

August day. Let's sit in the shade a while, and cool off, while we're waiting for Landy and Chatz to show up."

Accordingly the trio of boys in faded khaki suits, that looked as though they had seen considerable service, proceeded to perch upon the topmost rail of a fence at a point where a splendid oak tree threw its wide-spreading branches over the road.

They were just outside the town of Hickory Ridge, and if you want to know where this usually wide-awake place was situated it might be well to refer to earlier books in this Series in order to ascertain all the interesting particulars.

These three lads belonged to the local troop of scouts, just then in a most flourishing condition. Under the leadership of Elmer Chenowith the Wolf Patrol of the troop had accomplished so many unusual things that a fever had taken possession of the town boys to become enrolled.

There was also the Beaver Patrol, with a full number, and the Eagle as well as the Fox seemed destined to finish their quota of eight members in the early Fall.

The three boys whom we have met on the road chanced to be among the original charter members of the troop. All of them belonged to the Wolf Patrol; for it often happens that fellows wearing the same totem are brought closer together than others.

Since it chances that the exciting incidents which we have started out to chronicle in the pres-

ent story fell almost exclusively to the portion of the boys belonging to the original Wolf Patrol, it might be well to give a brief description of who and what they were, before going any further.

Elmer Chenowith, being the patrol leader, comes first in line. He was a manly lad, with many winning qualities that made him a prime favorite among his fellows. At one time his father had had charge of a vast farm and cattle ranch up in the Canadian Northwest, and while there the boy had learned a thousand things calculated to be useful to him in his capacity of a scout.

He had long ago received official authority from Boy Scout Headquarters to act as a deputy or assistant scout master, whenever the regular overseer, young Mr. Roderic Garrabrant, could not be present. Elmer filled the position in such a clever fashion that no one ever questioned his ability to play the part of guide.

Then there was Mark Anthony Cummings, who was looked upon as Elmer's chum. He was the grandson of a famous artist, and there were those who prophesied that some day Mark would follow in the footsteps of his illustrious ancestor; for he would draw off-hand charcoal sketches of his chums, mostly in a humorous vein, that excited roars of laughter. Mark was also something of a musician, and had in the beginning been elected to fill the position of bugler to the troop.

Ted Burgoyne was afflicted with a dreadful lisp, on account of a hare-lip, so that as the boys

used to say if offered a fortune he could get no closer to the real thing when dared than to say "thoft thoap." But then Ted was a marvel in his way, for he had more knowledge of medicine than all the other boys of the troop combined; and on this account they often called him "Doctor Ted," or "Old Sawbones."

In cases of snake-bite, fainting, cramps, near-drowning, cuts from the camp axe or hatchet, gun-shot wounds, broken bones, or, in fact, anything likely to happen to campers, Ted was what Lil Artha always called "Johnny-on-the-spot," though Toby could never pin him down to saying "which spot."

Toby Jones was really the "funny" boy of the patrol. His grandfather being one of those Zouave veterans, who had accompanied Colonel Ellsworth to Washington when the war between the States broke out, and saw the latter shot in Alexandria, Virginia, while taking down a Confederate flag, nothing would do but that the boy must bear that venerated name and so he was christened Tobias Ellsworth Jones.

Toby was ambitious. His leaning lay in the line of aeronautics, and he was always trying to invent some sort of aeroplane that would discount all the efforts of such men as the Wright brothers. The dreadful fate of Darius Green and his famous flying machine had no terrors for Toby, though his chums were always warning him to beware.

He had, on several occasions in the past, attempted to show off with one of these ambitious

contraptions. Those who have read some of the preceding volumes of this Series know what ludicrous results came about because of this overvaulting ambition on the part of Toby. But he was not one whit discouraged, and often declared that unless his life were cut short he meant to see that the name of the Joneses went "ringing down the ages" as one of the most illustrious since the days of Paul Jones, the American who fought sea battles in the Revolutionary War.

Lil Artha, in reality Arthur Stansbury, was reckoned a good scout, and a loyal companion who could both play a joke and take one when it was aimed at him; he was rather fond of photography, and addicted somewhat to harmless slang.

The sixth member of the original Wolf Patrol was a Southern boy, Charlie Maxfield by name, though known simply as "Chatz." He possessed all the traits to be found in boys who have been born and raised south of Mason and Dixon's line, was inclined to be touchy whenever he thought anyone doubted his honor, talked with a quaint little twang that was really delightfully musical, and taken in all had grown to be a prime favorite with his fellows.

Chatz had one silly weakness which, though he tried hard to overcome it, would occasionally crop up. He was dreadfully superstitious, and believed in ghosts, which failing he laid to his having associated with piccaninnies when a youngster, and in some way imbibing their belief in the supernatural.

Yes, Chatz at one time had even carried a rabbit's foot for luck, and to ward off evil spirits. The animal was said to have been killed in a graveyard in the full moon and it was a sure-enough *left* hind foot, too, which he believed to be a very important distinction, since no other would answer. Of late, however, Chatz said less about these things than when he first came to Hickory Ridge; and Elmer believed he was by degrees outgrowing the foolish, superstitious beliefs of his childhood.

Two later additions to the Wolf Patrol were Henry Condit, known simply as "Hen," and Landy Smith, otherwise Philander. The latter was a fat, good-natured chap, always perspiring, and who had a queer habit of placing his forefinger alongside his nose when puzzled or reflecting.

As occasional mention may be made in these pages to other members of the Troop, it might be well to simply give a list of their names and "let it go at that," as Lil Artha would say.

The Beaver Patrol being full consisted of eight boys. Matty Eggleston was the leader, and after him came "Red" Huggins, Ty Collins, Jasper Merriweather, Tom Cropsey, Larry Billings, Phil Dale and "Doubting George" Robbins, a cousin to Landy.

There were also four members to the Eagle Patrol, with others about to come in. Jack Armitage filled the position of leader, and after him came Nat Scott, Ben Slimmons and Jim Oskamp.

Apparently, the three fellows perched on the Virginia rail fence had agreed to wait for others who were to join them in starting for the favorite "swimmin' hole," for their conversation betrayed this fact.

Lil Artha began to grow a little impatient. He wiped his perspiring face and in so many words gave his two chums to understand that if the laggards did not put in an appearance inside of ten minutes he meant to start without them.

"A fine lot of scouts Chatz and Landy are showing themselves to be, not keeping their word," the tall boy grumbled; "there, didn't you hear the clock strike ten? They were to be here not later than a quarter to the hour."

"Oh! well, you know Chatz isn't in a hurry," chuckled Toby. "Fellows raised down in Dixie are used to taking their time. It's the warm climate that does it, he told me. But speaking of angels and you hear their wings, they say; for unless my eyes deceive me there comes Chatz right now."

"Yeth, and thauntering along like he might be away ahead of the time thet for meeting here. Chatz ith what I call a cool cuthtomer."

When the fourth lad joined the bunch, there was a lot of good-natured badinage indulged in all around, after the manner of boys in general.

"Do you intend waiting any longer fo' Landy?" asked the newcomer.

At that remark the other laughed uproariously.

"It makes me think of the full 'bus," said Lil

Artha; "when it stops to take on another passenger they all look cross; and he squeezes into a seat wondering why people will act so piggish; but let it stop again for another fare and he grumbles louder than anybody else."

"Yeth, we've waited fifteen minutes for you, Chatz," said Ted, "and it'd be only fair to give poor, fat Landy ten minutes more."

Chatz immediately took out his little nickel watch and held it in his hand, just as though he might have been the judge at a sprinting match.

Before five minutes had crept past, however, there was a cry raised.

"Here comes poor old Landy," said Toby, "mounted on his wheezy bicycle, and pegging for all he's worth. Look at him puffing away, will you? He just knows he's been keeping us waiting here ever so long, and that's making him put on so much steam. Wow! he nearly took a header that time into the ditch. What a splash there would have been, my countrymen, if he played leap-frog into that mud-puddle!"

The boys sat there on the rail fence and began to greet the coming bicycle rider with loud shouts.

"Hit her up, Landy!"

"One good turn deserves another, you know."

"A little more power to your left foot, or you'll be in that ditch yet, Landy!"

"Oh! Landy, does your mother know you're risking your precious old neck on that beaut of a wheel?"

The fat scout did not cease his exertions until he had reached the place where his four chums sat on the fence. Then they saw that while his round face was red, and the perspiration stood out in beads on his forehead, there was a drawn, almost a scared look on his countenance.

"Hey! what ails the fellow?" burst out Lil Artha, as though discovering that Landy was trembling more with some mysterious emotion than fatigue.

"Yeth, hurry up and tell uth what's happened!" cried Ted Burgoyne, jumping off his perch, and hastening to the side of the panting boy.

Landy seemed to swallow something that may have been threatening to choke him. Then making a great effort, he managed to say a few words.

"Terrible thing's happened, fellows! Knocks the reputation of the Wolf Patrol all to smithereens!"

Of course, this excited those four scouts as nothing else could have done.

"Has anything happened to Elmer?" almost shouted Toby.

"No, it's Hen Condit!" answered Landy; "he's gone and stole a lot of money from his guardian, and lit out, that's what! And him belonging to the Wolf Patrol, too!"

CHAPTER II

WHEN HEN CONDIT LEFT TOWN

"Hey! say that over again, won't you, Landy? I sure believe my ears must have fooled me!" exclaimed Lil Artha.

"Hen Condit robbed his uncle and guardian, are you telling us, Landy?" gasped Toby; "aw! come off, now, you're just giving us taffy, thinking it smart."

"I tell you I just came from their house," continued the perspiring scout, mopping his reeking forehead with a suspicious looking handkerchief that may once on a time have been really white. "You see, Mr. Condit didn't get up as early as he generally does, because he had a *terrible* headache. And say, they even think he might have been given a dose of chloroform to make him sleep longer."

"Hold on, fellows," snapped Toby just then, "as luck will have it here comes Elmer in his father's little runabout. He said he had to go over to Rockaway on an important errand for his dad this morning, which was the only reason he couldn't join us for a swim. Let's hold him up, and Landy can tell the whole story then."

When they made urgent gestures to the boy in

the swift-flying runabout, he hastened to pull up, laughing at the same time.

"I hurried over and back on purpose to follow you fellows to the ole swimmin' hole," he told them; "but I didn't expect to meet you on the way. Don't delay me; I'll jump on my wheel to chase after you."

"But, Elmer, something awful has happened, and you ought to know about it," declared Toby, at which the boy in the small car looked searchingly at each of the others in turn, and seeing how grave they appeared, he demanded what it meant.

"Why, you see," explained Lil Artha, "Landy here was late in joining us. He just came along on his machine, pegging it for all he was worth, and looking like he had seen one of the ghosts some people believe in. He only started to tell us when you came in sight; but it's terrible. What d'ye think, he says our Wolf Patrol comrade, Hen Condit, has run away from home, and robbed his guardian in the bargain!"

Elmer instantly jumped to the road. He faced Landy as a lawyer might a witness on the stand; and Elmer knew just how to "pump" a fellow so as to get the principal facts without much loss of time, as his chums understood.

"Go on and tell us about it, Landy," he commanded. "How did you happen to learn about the fact in the first place?"

"Why, you see," answered the other, only too willing to explain to the best of his ability, "ma,

she sent me over on an errand to the Condit house. I was madder'n hops about it, too, because I just knew I'd be keepin' the fellows waiting here under the Grandaddy Oak."

"What did you find when you got there?" asked Elmer, who knew Landy to be long-winded, and that often the quickest way to learn facts from him was to put him on the grill.

"Why, they were all upset," admitted Landy. "Mr. Condit was as mad as a bull in a china shop, and his wife was looking as white as chalk, yes, and scared, too. Seems that when he went into his library after eating breakfast he found the safe open and everything gone. It was an 'inside job' the Chief said, because nobody had busted the safe."

"Then the Chief was there, was he?" questioned the patrol leader.

"Sure he was; Mr. Condit had 'phoned to him. There were a dozen neighbors in the house, too, and more acomin' right along. Biggest kind of excitement. Oh! it's going to be town property before night, I guess, and lots of people'll be pointing their fingers at every fellow wearing khaki, and saying they always knew scouts was no better than the law allowed. Oh! wouldn't I like to get hold of that Hen Condit, though."

"What makes them believe it was Hen" continued Elmer.

"Say, that's the queerest part of it all," answered the fat boy; "the silly gump gave the whole business away himself—went and left a note

behind him telling that he was the guilty villain, and that they needn't ever expect to see him again, because he had lit out for Chicago."

"Whew! you don't say!" gasped Lil Arthur, apparently half stunned by this later intelligence; "I never would have thought Hen could be such a fool as to convict himself like that."

"When was he seen last?" demanded Elmer, still after information.

"He went to bed last night, they said, just as usual; but shucks! it would be the easiest thing agoing for Hen to climb down from his window if he took a notion. I've known him to do the same dozens of times just for fun, rather than take the trouble to go around to the stairs."

"Then Hen has disappeared, and no one has seen him this morning?"

"Never a soul. His aunt went to his room when he didn't show up, but not finding him expected Hen had gone off to my house. And his uncle is whopping mad over it. He nearly took a fit when the expert Chief said he reckoned someone had chloroformed him. He called Hen a viper that he had fostered, and said if he could only ketch him he'd see that he got his deserts."

"Listen, Landy, did you see that note?" asked Elmer.

"That's what I did, let me tell you," came the prompt reply, "and it was in Hen's well-known fist, too; I could tell that a mile off if I saw it. Haven't I heard the writing teacher at school tell him he was well named, because his paper looked

like a hen had dabbled in the ink, and then strolled around every-which-way."

"Then you can tell us about what it said, can't you?" continued the patrol leader.

Landy laid that ready forefinger of his alongside his nose, as though that action would aid his memory. Then he closed one eye, another singular habit he had; after which he slowly went on to say:

"Course the exact words have slipped me, Elmer, but it ran something like this. He said circumstances which he couldn't control had forced him to do this thing; that he was sorry, but it couldn't be helped. He hoped his uncle would forgive him, and forget there was such a fellow in the wide world as Hen Condit. There was also some more that I can't just recollect; but it was to the effect that he believed he had money coming to him, so Mr. Condit could take it out of that and call it square. But just think what all this is going to do to the scouts, Elmer! Never since the troop was organized has it met up with such a terrible blow."

All of them looked serious. They knew that a certain element in Hickory Ridge would only too eagerly seize upon this incident to prove what they had always claimed, which was that scouts, after all, were no better than other boys, and that when put to the test they could turn out bad as well as the rest.

"Yes, the honor of the Wolf Patrol is hanging in the balance, Elmer," said Lil Artha. "Are we

going to just stand by and not lift a hand because it was one of our chums who did this mean job? If it was anyone else and they called on us to track him, wouldn't we respond to a man? Here's a supreme test before us that's going to prove how much our honor means."

"I say the same, Elmer," urged Chatz, indignantly; "let's all get busy and see if we can run Hen Condit down like a fox we've got on the trail of. Let's fetch him back to face his uncle, and prove to all Hickory Ridge that the boys of the Wolf Patrol can never stand for wrong doing in their ranks. Yes suh, it's surely up to us to show our colors."

Elmer rubbed his forehead. He looked thoughtful, as though possibly he might see a little further into this mysterious happening than any of the rest.

"Listen, fellows," he told them; "I've known for some little time that Hen was acting queerly. He failed to attend the last two meetings, and when I asked him about it he avoided my eye. I've been wondering what it all meant, and intended to have a good heart-to-heart talk-fest with Hen as soon as I got a chance."

"Hold on," said Toby. "I wonder now if that man I saw him with could have had anything to do with this ugly business."

Elmer turned on him like a flash.

"It may have more to do with it than you think, Toby," he remarked; "when was it you saw them, and where?"

"Just yesterday morning," replied the other, "and down at the bridge over the creek. Hen nodded to me when I rode past on my wheel, but it struck me even at the time he acted like he hoped to goodness I wouldn't bother stopping to say anything."

"And a man you didn't know was with him, you say?" questioned Elmer.

"Well, I didn't just glimpse his face, for you see he turned his head away as I passed, but I made up my mind he was a stranger in these regions, so far as I could see."

"That looks mighty suspicious, I should say, suh!" declared Chatz, positively. "That stranger is the nigger in the woodpile, according to my mind, suh."

"Mebbe poor weak Hen has been cowed and bulldozed into doing the whole thing," suggested Lil Artha, sagely.

"Now, I wonder if that could weally be tho?" remarked Ted.

"We ought to get busy and do something right away, Elmer," observed Toby Jones.

"I'm glad to know that's the way you feel about it," continued the patrol leader. "This is a bad piece of business. It's up to the boys of the Wolf Patrol to find out the truth. I had laid out another scheme for our last outing of this vacation, but everything must give way to tracking our comrade down, and learning the whole truth!"

"Bully for you, Elmer!" ejaculated Lil Artha, looking delighted.

The others were almost as exuberant in their expressions of approval. Just a brief time before some of their number had been wondering what could be done to give them a short siege in the woods to wind up the vacation period; and here along comes this necessity calling to the other members of the Wolf Patrol to awaken and defend the honor of their organization.

"Here, jump aboard all of you but Landy, and he can come along on his wheel," ordered Elmer, making room after he had seated himself back of the steering wheel.

"Are you meaning to go to Hen's house?" called out Landy, looking worried because he was to be left behind, and would have to straddle his wheezy old wheel once more.

"Yes, if you care to toss your machine in those bushes, Landy, and can get aboard, come along!" called out Elmer, relenting when he caught that piteous expression on the other's rosy face.

In another moment they were off, Landy having been hauled aboard. The runabout had never been made to carry such a full cargo of passengers; but then boys can hang on like monkeys, and are ever ready to accept chances.

They were quickly at the Condit house. Like the home of Landy, it stood on the border of the town, with a back gate opening on a side road. Altogether, there may have been two acres in the place.

By now fully two dozen curious people were in and around the house upon which such a sudden

catastrophe had fallen. They talked among themselves, asked questions, examined the queer note signed by Hen, and shook their heads pityingly as they observed the white face of the boy's suffering aunt.

Mr. Condit was a rather severe man. He looked very angry, and kept calling the boy hard names as he told how Hen must have known the combination of the safe; and doubtless doubled at least the amount taken in hard cash, as it is human nature to make even troubles seem many times as large as they are.

Elmer and the others managed to see the convicting note. They were all of the same opinion as Landy; and agreed that no one but Hen could ever have written those fateful words.

"I never would have believed he could ever be such a silly gump!" was what Lil Artha remarked, after surveying the crooked writing, which, of course, he knew only too well.

After they had hung around for some time, and Elmer had asked all the questions he could think of, the boys went outside to talk it over.

"Right now some of those people are looking at us in a sneering way, suh," observed the touchy Southern boy, indignantly; "and I give you my word fo' it they're beginning to say among themselves that Hen Condit belonged to the wonderful Wolf Patrol. Elmer, we've suttinly got to do something to clear the good name of our patrol."

"We will," replied the other, simply, and yet with that earnestness which carries conviction

in its train. "Already I've got a suspicion. There may be nothing to it but it's given me an idea where we ought to look first of all."

"Please tell us about it, Elmer?" begged Toby.

"I just knew Elmer would get on the track in double-quick time," asserted Landy, who always believed there was nothing impossible to the patrol leader, once he set himself to a task.

"It all came about from hearing a boy talking when I was down in the market yesterday morning. You know who he is, Johnny Spreen, the fellow who always ships out a raft of dried ginseng roots every year, and in the Spring sends a bunch of muskrat skins to the city."

"Sure we know Johnny," assented Toby, quickly; "he comes to town with a load of hay once every two weeks. His folks live a long ways off, up beyond the two lakes where we used to go camping."

"That's right, Toby," said Elmer, "and their farm borders that terribly big Sassafras Swamp lying beyond Lake Solitude. Well, I happened to hear Johnny tell how he had taken a look through the swamp the other day, just to find out how the muskrats were coming on, so as to get a pointer on his winter business this year. He said he honestly believed there must be some man hiding there, because in several places he had come on tracks."

"But people sometimes go in Sassafras Swamp to hunt, don't they, Elmer?" objected Lil Artha.

"Not in August, because there are no woodcock

up there, you know, and nothing else can be shot at this time of year," Elmer continued; "but Johnny had something else to say that interested me considerably. It seems at one place he found ashes that told of a fire, and while rooting around he picked up a piece of steel that he allowed me to see. It had evidently been *filed;* and boys, can you guess what it made me think it must have once been?"

Although all of them looked eagerly interested, they shook their heads in the negative, as though unable to hazard even a guess.

"Go on, Elmer, and tell us," urged Toby.

"Yes, let down the bars and relieve our anxiety, please, Elmer," added Lil Artha.

"Unless I'm away off in my reckoning," said the other, solemnly, "it was part of a pair of steel handcuffs such as officers fasten to the wrists of prisoners when taking them to the penitentiary!"

CHAPTER III

A PROMISING CLUE

It was about four o'clock on the following afternoon when a wagon drawn by a pair of husky horses moved along the shore of Lake Solitude, many miles away from the town of Hickory Ridge.

This vehicle was filled with lively lads, all of them in the faded khaki uniforms that, as a rule, distinguish Boy Scouts the wide world over.

Counting them it would be seen that they numbered just seven, and this included all of those whom we met on the road under the spreading branches of the big oak, and Mark Cummings in addition. Since the entire membership of the Wolf Patrol consisted of eight, it was plain that the only one now lacking was the unfortunate Hen Condit.

After making up their minds to exert themselves to the utmost in hopes of finding the runaway, and bringing him back home, Elmer and the others had set to work preparing for the campaign.

The patrol leader gave such advice as was required by some of the others, telling them to go as light as possible, since they would have to be moving around, and ordinary camp material could not be considered.

If they were compelled to remain out in the open for one or more nights, there were plenty of ways whereby they could secure shelter without carrying along such a cumbersome thing as a tent.

Each fellow had his rubber poncho strapped to his pack. Elmer and Lil Artha carried a gun each, not that they expected to shoot any game, but to use as a threat should they be faced by a desperate escaped jail bird. Besides this the boys had seen to it that each one had some sort of food supply, in the shape of sandwiches, dried beef, and such things as could be most easily packed.

As Lil Artha had gaily declared, they expected to be like "Sherman's bummers," and live off the country as they went along, though willing to pay ready cash for any and all eggs, fowls or bread secured from farmers' wives.

Josh had arranged to "tote" a coffee pot along, together with a supply of the ground bean; while Landy had a capacious frying-pan fastened to his pack, which the others just knew would be frequently tripping him up, and making all sorts of noises when they wanted to steal silently along.

Just what they meant to fry in that pan no one fully knew; but they were strong in "hopes," and believed that things would turn up to satisfy their hunger when the sensation became too acute.

The team had been hired at the town livery stable, and they had been on the road now since early in the morning, for it was a long way up to Lake Solitude.

As this region had been the scene of some of the earliest camps of the Hickory Ridge scouts, of course, the conversation covered many memories connected with those experiences.

The horses had shown signs of playing out some miles back; but Lil Artha proved himself to be an artful as well as clever driver. He managed to coax them along, and there was little doubt now that they would reach their intended destination inside of a short time.

This was a farmer's place that lay adjacent to the swamp at the head of the solitary lake. Here they would arrange to leave their team while searching the dark recesses of the swamp. As all of them had had considerable experience in such unsavory places they believed they knew fairly well how to go about the hunt.

"Well, we ought to fetch that old farm mighty soon now, I should think, Elmer," remarked the driver, as he flecked the back of the off-horse to disturb a big green fly that was trying to stab the sweat-covered animal in a tender spot.

"From what I've been able to find out, and what I know in the bargain from my own experience up here," the patrol leader explained, "the head of the lake lies just beyond that patch of willow trees, and we'll see the farmhouse as soon as we make the next turn. Easy there, Art, you came near dumping us then."

"The pesky old road is so narrow it's hard to keep going straight," complained the other, in disgust; for one wheel had, indeed, slipped over the

edge, and their escape from a bad spill had been what Lil Artha himself would have called a "close shave."

"I reckon suh, Sassafras Swamp must lie over in that direction then?" remarked Chatz, pointing as he spoke.

"Just what it does," replied Elmer.

"It looks particularly gloomy, I should say," remarked Toby.

"Swamps always do, you must know," Elmer told him; "some of them are always half dark even in the middle of the day. That's because of the jumble of vines that hang from tree to tree, and the canopy of branches overhead. Why, down South, as Chatz here can tell you, where Spanish moss covers the trees, it's almost dark in some swamps."

"But, Elmer, there's one thing I just don't understand," suggested Landy.

"Out with it then; and if I can explain I'll be only too willing," he was told.

"Supposing now for the sake of argument that stranger was a bad man who had escaped from a sheriff somewhere, when being taken to the penitentiary; and that he managed to get a strangle hold on our chum, Hen Condit, so that the other just had to do whatever he was told—get all that, do you? Well, if they skipped out of Hickory Ridge night before last, how under the sun could they get away up here in a day or so?"

"Yes, it's something like thirty miles, I should say, Elmer, and it takes that boy Johnny a day

and a night to get to our place with his load, all down-grade, too. You remember that Hen Condit never was anything to brag of in the line of a long-distance walker."

"He may have made up his mind that he had to do some tall sprinting," said the other, "when he realized what a hornets' nest he'd stirred up back there."

"Yeth," remarked Ted Burgoyne who had been listening to all this talk with certain ideas of his own, "and lots of times it ithn't tho very hard to get a lift on the road. Wagons and autoth happen along, you know, and the farmers around here are thoft things, you thee."

"I was just going to say that same thing, Ted," Elmer remarked, "when you took the very words out of my mouth. Yes, they may have had a lift; or else Hen had to stretch himself to do the tallest walking of his career. All of which is based on the supposition that they *did* come away up here, and are hiding right now somewhere about Sassafras Swamp."

"You're figuring on what Johnny said, eh, Elmer?" asked Mark.

"I'm figuring on a whole lot of things," replied the other; "and among them is the fact that some unknown man has been using the swamp for a hiding-place of late."

"P'raps we'll learn a heap more about it after we stwike the farm we're heading for," suggested Ted.

"And there, if you look now you can see the

house among those trees, with smoke coming out of the chimney at the kitchen end," said Elmer, pointing ahead.

Lil Artha deliberately took chances by removing one hand from the lines, and vigorously rubbing his stomach with it.

"Oh! I know something of what bully suppers farmers' wives c'n serve up," he hastened to say, throwing all the longing he could into looks and words; "and here's hoping we get an invite to stay over there till morning. If they are *very* pressing, Elmer, I entreat you not to hurry us off. Things can wait that long, and we don't expect to do much in the night-time, you remember."

The patrol leader made no rash promises. He simply smiled, and started to talk of other subjects; so poor Lil Artha, who did feel so empty after such a little lunch by the wayside, was left in suspense.

"What's this farmer's name?" asked Toby.

"Trotter," replied Elmer. "You know Johnny Spreen is really a bound boy, and he has to work for the farmer until he gets a certain age, when he is supposed to be given a sum of money, and be his own boss. That's the law."

"Well, all I hope is that we pick up some decent clue around here," said Lil Artha; "Yes, and a bully supper in the bargain, that'll fill a horrible vacuum, and put us all in fighting condition."

Their arrival created something of a sensation. Dogs began to bark, roosters to crow, cows to moo,

and even a donkey started to bray in a fearful fashion. Immediately Johnny Spreen, the boy who trapped muskrats in the winter, came running out from the big barn where he was probably milking some of the cows, for he held a three-legged stool in one hand as though it might be a weapon of defense.

The farmer, a long, lanky individual with a keen face, also bobbed in sight, holding a currycomb; while at the kitchen door could be seen the buxom figure of his wife, evidently bound to learn what was happening even if her dinner did burn in consequence.

Three tow-headed, wild-eyed little Trotters, who had been playing at teeter with a plank laid over a carpenter's "horse" for a seesaw, ranged themselves all in a row, and gaped their fill at the strange spectacle of a wagonload of boys all dressed pretty much alike.

"Are you Mr. Trotter?" asked Elmer, as he jumped down, and the other came forward toward him.

"That's my name, son; what fetches the hull lot of you up this way? Ameanin' to camp on the lake-shore, it might be? I've heard about the scouts daown at Hickory Ridge; Johnny yonder's been apinin' to jine 'em this long time back, but, of course, it ain't to be thunk of, with him so far away."

"Yes, we are the members of the Wolf Patrol," Mr. Trotter," said Elmer, who wanted to make a good friend of the farmer in the start. "I'm

Elmer Chenowith; perhaps you know my father, or some of the other fellows' parents."

He thereupon introduced each one of the boys by name, and even mentioned the fact that the father of this one or that occupied a prominent place in the business or professional world of Hickory Ridge town.

"We haven't exactly come up here to camp out this trip, Mr. Trotter," continued the patrol leader, after bowing to the farmer's wife who had first darted indoors to see that her supper was not burning, and then hurried to join them.

Elmer knew that the truth might just as well come out in the beginning as later. On this account he did not intend to hold anything back, but be perfectly frank with the owner of the lake farm.

"What might be your object then, son?" asked the tiller of the soil, possibly feeling a bit of natural curiosity in the matter.

"Ask him first of all, won't you Elmer," pleaded Lil Artha, as though he feared lest this important matter be lost sight of in the confusion of affairs; "whether he c'n spare us some eggs, and a few broilers to take into the old swamp with us?"

"I guess ma c'n let you have what you want along them lines," replied Mr. Trotter, "though seems like somebody's been amakin' free with her layin' hens lately. They keep disappearin' right along. Sometimes I think it's a mink that's gettin' 'em, but they ain't any signs of sech a critter

around; 'cause you know a mink'll kill as many as a dozen fowls in one night, and jest suck their blood."

Elmer exchanged suggestive looks with his mates.

"From what you say, sir," he remarked quickly, "your fowls are carried off bodily. Is that it?"

"They jest keep on gettin' less an' less right along," the farmer admitted. "Me and Johnny here was thinkin' o' settin' up with guns to see if we could get a crack at the chicken thief, whether he was a mink, a badger, or a two-legged raskil."

"That's what we was meanin' to do," agreed the said Johnny, glad to have his name mentioned in the matter at all.

"Well, we've got a hunch, Mr. Trotter," said Lil Artha, bound to get his say in the affair, "that we might put you wise about that same thief."

"I'd shore be glad to hear it," declared the farmer; "Johnny here has been asayin' as heow he b'lieves thar's a feller ahidin' out in the swamp, 'cause he seen his tracks. I even reckoned on sendin' for a neighbor o' mine, Ray Stanhope, that's got some hounds used to follerin' people, an' see if we could run him daown."

"Well, Mr. Trotter, that is exactly what we scouts propose doing," said Elmer. "And now if you'll listen to something I've got to tell, you can understand what sort of interest we've got in this thing."

So in as few words as possible he narrated the

story of how Hen Condit had acted in such a queer way, robbing his uncle and guardian, and actually leaving a silly letter that fastened the crime on his own shoulders.

"He was seen by one of my chums talking with a strange man just the day before this happened," continued Elmer. "We believe that man was the same unknown party who has been hiding in Sassafras Swamp for a time past, and as you've just told us, living off your flock of fowls. Johnny here, down in the hay market, gave me something he picked up in the swamp near some ashes. Here it is, Mr. Trotter, and all of us believe firmly it is part of a steel handcuff which was filed in half, showing that the man must be a desperate character escaped from jail."

At that the farmer's wife uttered a little shriek, and began to look frightened.

"Hennery," she told her husband authoritatively, "you go git your gun right away. And Johnny, chain the bull-dog close to the kitchen door. After this I'm meanin' to make sure the bar's in place when I'm left alone, and Moses kept inside the house along with me."

Elmer guessed that the said Moses must be the bull-dog. He also figured that, as a rule, the animal was kept indoors nights, which accounted for his not having interfered with the carrying off of the farmer's chickens.

Mr. Trotter was plainly deeply interested by this time in the story connected with the coming of these seven scouts.

"Sure I'll do all I kin to help you land the critters, boys," he assured them. "But that swamp is some big, an' I guess as haow you'll have all you want to do achasin' through the same. Supposin' naow you let things rest till tomorry, and make an early start. Mebbe we might bag the raskils this very night, if so be they try to make another haul on my feathered stock, aimin' to git a turkey this time.

Of course, Elmer could see through a grindstone that had a hole in its center. He knew very well that the shrewd farmer wanted to make use of them in order to protect his property; but it served Elmer's purpose just as well to readily agree to the proposition.

As for Lil Artha, his eyes were almost popping out of his head with suspense; he was also licking his lips after the manner of a hungry dog when scenting a bone.

"We'll stop over with you then, Mr. Trotter," agreed the patrol leader; "and before morning try to figure out our plan of campaign looking to rounding up the chicken thieves who are believed to be hiding in Sassafras Swamp."

CHAPTER IV

JOHNNY'S CHICKEN THIEF TRAP

"I'm only sorry for one thing, boys," remarked Farmer Trotter's wife, who had apparently hailed the decision of the seven bold scouts to guard her fowl-roost with undeniable joy.

"What might that be, ma'm?" asked Lil Artha, in a quivering voice; for the poor fellow began to have a terrible fear that she was about to warn them her stock of provisions was too valuable to be wasted on a batch of tramps.

"Of course, we'll be glad to have you to supper, and breakfast, too, for that matter," she told them; "but I'm afraid I couldn't find beds enough to go 'round, even if you all doubled up."

At that the elongated scout gave a loud laugh; the clouds passed from his face like magic. If he could only be positive of his regular rations it mattered nothing to Lil Artha where he laid his head.

"Oh! don't let that little thing bother you, Mrs. Trotter," he hastened to say, thereby making himself spokesman for the crowd; "why, we're used to camping out, you see, and in our time we've slept in the queerest beds you ever heard tell of.

We can bunk in any old place, I give you my word."

"What's the matter with sleeping in the barn?" asked Toby, suddenly.

"That's so," added Landy, eagerly; "it's nearly full of nice sweet hay, cut only a month or so back. Me to hit the hay every time."

In fact, the idea seemed to appeal to all of them. They had planned to make their camp just as circumstances permitted, and this thing of spending the first night in a hay barn was romantic enough to suit the fancy of any scout who loved adventure and the Big Outdoors.

So it was quickly settled.

The boys were shown the barn by the eager Johnny, who could hardly finish his numerous chores on account of the excitement surrounding him. It was an event of prime importance, according to his mind, when seven real scouts came and took the farmhouse of the Trotters by storm.

That supper was one never to be forgotten by the fellows.

Why, according to Lil Artha, and he ought to know as well as the next one, the table fairly *groaned* under the weight of good things which the farmer's wife kept placing upon it.

"Talk about your festive board," the tall scout afterwards remarked to several of his pards, "that table just talked, that's what it did, and in the sweetest tones you ever heard. Yum! yum, wouldn't I like to board with the lady of the Trotter Farm for just one long week. I'd pick up flesh

at the rate of five pounds per day. The only trouble would be about getting into my clothes in the end."

Johnny had shown them where they were to sleep, so that each fellow could fix himself to his best advantage. This was done ahead of time, for all of them knew how difficult it was to manage such things by the aid of a wretched stable lantern.

Elmer saw that Johnny was fairly itching to tell him something, and so he managed to get the bound boy aside just as darkness was creeping along.

"What have you got up your sleeve, Johnny?" he demanded, at which the other had a laughing spell, and confessed.

"Why, you see, I got a trap all rigged out!" he started to explain.

"A trap for the chicken thieves, do you mean?" asked the patrol leader.

"That's the ticket, Elmer. Yuh see, I reckoned that by now they'd be gettin' real tired o' jest plain hen, and might feel like climbin' higher. We gut some whoopin' nice young turks that like tuh roost in a certain tree. Easiest thing in the world tuh grab a couple in the night, and kerry 'em off. So I fixed it."

"Suppose you let me take a look at the trap you made, Johnny?" suggested Elmer, naturally interested.

"Jest what I was agoin' tuh ask yuh tuh do, Elmer. And I guess now it wouldn't be a bad ijee

fur the rest tuh kim along, too. If so be there's a kerflummix in the middle o' the night, they ought tuh know what she means."

Now, Elmer himself could not exactly find a definition for that word, but he had a faint idea Johnny meant a big noise or a row. At any rate he was glad of the chance to invite the other six scouts to accompany them.

Elmer lighted a lantern, and after the boys had gathered around he led them away from the big barn.

Presently, at some little distance, he came to a halt.

"This here's the tree the turks hes picked out tuh roost in. Some o' 'em likes tuh fly 'way up, but others prefers the bottom limbs. If a feller's keerful he kin climb up and wring the necks o' as many as he wants. Young turks they don't know nigh as much as old uns, yuh see. Now I'll show yuh how I sets my trap."

First of all they noticed that there was what appeared to be a drygoods box exactly under the tree.

"Seems to me you're making it mighty easy for the chicken thieves when they drop around, with that box right under the lower row of turkeys?" suggested Toby, upon discovering this fact.

Johnny Spreen gurgled over with laughter.

"Say, d'ye reckon so?" he exclaimed; "well, by hokey! now, that's part of the game, sure it be."

"Oh! then you really want them to climb up

on that big box when trying to grab one of the young turkeys?" asked Lil Artha.

"Jes' so," chuckled the bound boy.

"Is she loaded, then?" continued Lil Artha, as all of them gravely examined the innocent-looking box.

"I'll show yuh how she works," Johnny said, proudly. "Mebbe my ijee ain't good for nawthin', but she's the best I could think up. Course, the thieves they hain't fotchin' no lantern along, 'cause they'd be afeared we'd see a movin' light. Then ag'in I don't b'lieve sich slinkers ever does own a lantern."

"That's right, Johnny," remarked Toby, impatiently, "let's take it for granted then they come in the dark. What will they do next?"

"Huh! what'd any feller do when he sees sech a nice box awaitin' for him to git up on, so's to grab the nigh turk?" demanded Johnny. "Now, if yuh watch me yuh'll git the ijee in a jiffy."

A stout rope seemed to be hanging from the limb overhead. It had a running noose at the end, which the bound boy was now adjusting on the top of the drygoods box.

Elmer chuckled as he began to grasp the scheme; it seemed pretty smart to him, and he was ready to give the bound boy credit for a bright idea.

"Now," continued Johnny, "jest tuh show yuh how she works I'm agoin' tuh make a wat yuh calls it, a martin o' myself. Hold the lantern, Elmer, and gimme room."

He climbed up on the big box. The turkeys were craning their necks and observing him with evident wonder, though they were undoubtedly on friendly terms with Johnny who had fed and driven them since hatching time, and knew his raspy voice.

"Yuh see, in the dark he don't notice the loop any," continued the inventor of the trap, "and when he gits real busy with the turks why there's a good chanct o' his foot gittin' caught in the loop. She on'y needs a leetle jerk this-aways!"

He gave the required pull, and instantly a most surprising event came to pass. That jerk at the rope must have set a hair-trigger going, for there followed a sudden rattling noise, the loop was instantly tightened around his ankle, and in a trice Johnny was hanging head down, as helpless as a snared rabbit.

The scouts clapped their hands in glee.

"Great scheme, Johnny!"

"It sure does you credit!"

"My! what a cwack when your feet hit the limb!"

So the scouts kept giving their views, while Johnny swung there, vainly trying to reach up and catch hold of the limb, with the turkeys twittering, and showing more or less alarm.

"Elmer, git me daown outen this, please!" begged the prisoner."

"But how can we do it, Johnny, when we don't know the combination of the racket?" demanded Lil Artha.

"Foller the rope, and shove the hogshead up the rise agin!" explained the suspended boy, who was probably already beginning to feel the discomforts of "standing on his head."

Several of them rushed off, and sure enough they found the secret of the springing of the trap. Johnny's clever scheme was simple enough when once its secret had been disclosed.

He had an old hogshead perched on the top of a steep little rise near by. It was connected with the long rope that had a noose at the end. When anyone pulled the rope, as with a foot caught in the loop, a trigger was set free, and the heavy hogshead started to roll down the little descent, jerking the entangled thief up by one or both ankles, as happened to be the case.

Of course, by rolling the hogshead back to its initial position Johnny was enabled to right himself, and get his foot free from the noose.

He started rubbing his shin as though it felt sore after such a rough experience, but they could hear him laughing softly to himself all the while.

"I jest reckoned the old thing'd work to beat the band," he told them; "an' now I knows it. Wait till I set the trap agin, fellers, an' then we'll go back tuh the barn. What d'ye spect's agoin' tuh happen if them chicken thieves kim around tuhnight, Elmer, hey?"

"Well, somebody's liable to meet up with the surprise of their lives, that's all," the scout patrol leader admitted.

The boys were pretty tired, and did not care to

remain up too long. Perhaps Mrs. Trotter might have liked to have these lively fellows in to sing for her, and enliven her monotonous life a little; but considering that they half expected to be hard pushed on the morrow, Elmer advised that they try to get all the sleep possible while they had the chance.

The horses had been well cared for, and arrangements made with the farmer to keep them in his stable until the scouts were ready to return to Hickory Ridge.

"This is what I call a soft snap," ventured Toby, who had burrowed into the hay as far as he thought necessary, and lay there at full length.

"The farmer was mighty careful to ask whether any of us smoked, you noticed," remarked Lil Artha.

"Can you blame him?" demanded Landy. "He must have twenty tons of fine new hay in this big barn, and that's worth all of four hundred dollars."

"Jutht as like ath not, too, he didn't put a cent of inthurance on the barn," Ted remarked; "farmers are cąreleth that way, you know."

"And so are boys who make out to be men because they smoke on the sly," Elmer went on to say. "More than one barn has been set on fire by smokers using matches in the hay. Tramps are responsible for a heap of this waste; and I don't blame any farmer for asking such a question. I'm glad we could tell him none of us had taken to the habit as yet."

"Or if they had they'd reformed!" chuckled Lil Artha, meaning himself.

"One thing sure," observed Mark, "if we hear that barrel crashing down the hill with all those stones inside it, we ought to be pretty spry getting out there, because a poor wretch might get dizzy hanging with his head down."

"What if nobody happened to hear the alarm," suggested Landy, who had a tender heart even when chicken thieves were concerned.

"I take it suh, that would be a bad thing fo' the coon that set the trap off," Chatz announced, gravely.

"Oh! Johnny has prepared for even that," said Elmer. "He showed me how he had fixed another cord that runs all the way to his room in the house. When the barrel starts to rolling that cord will be snapped, causing a weight to fall on the floor close to his bed, and bound to waken anybody but the dead."

"Say, that Johnny's a sure-enough wonder!" declared Toby; "he's got the inventive genius developed to beat the band. I'd like to see more of Johnny Spreen. Who knows but that we might hitch together and make a team. I've done a few little wrinkles along the line of invention myself, you remember. Jones and Spreen wouldn't sound bad."

Of course, that brought about a stirring up of old history, for many and humorous had been Toby's attempt to construct a flying machine, and also a parachute that would save the lives of dar-

ing aeronauts when their engines gave out a mile or two up in the air.

Finally, the boys began to talk less, and it could be easily seen that they were getting sleepy. Elmer really encouraged them to quit their efforts to keep awake. He himself felt that sleep would be welcome just then; and when that humor seizes a fellow he dislikes being kept awake against his will by the chattering of a comrade who does not know what a bed is meant for.

Then the last word was mumbled, and stentorian breathing here and there in those hay nests announced that the tired scouts had surrendered to the sleep god. Elmer was, perhaps, the last to drop off, for he had been thinking of a lot of things, running from the chicken-thief trap to the strange conduct of Hen Condit in robbing his guardian, and then leaving that ridiculous note to condemn himself.

Once Elmer chanced to awaken, and more from the habit of the cattle range than anything else, he raised his head to listen. The only sounds he heard consisted of the champing of the horses, still busy with their sweet hay, or it might be the distant cry of a whip-poor-will calling to its mate in the apple orchard.

So Elmer dropped back with a satisfied feeling such as comes on realizing that all is well. Perhaps the thieves would not make a visit to the farm adjoining the big Sassafras Swamp, on that particular night, at least. Perhaps morning would come at last, and find the trap undisturbed.

Elmer was letting these things pass through his brain in a hazy sort of way peculiar to one who is just yielding to sleep. He had almost reached the point when things would have slipped entirely from his grip when suddenly and without the least warning there started a tremendous racket such as he had noticed came to pass when that hogshead started rolling down the grade, and the stones with which it was loaded began to rattle about inside.

Almost at the same instant there rang out a shrill scream of agony that could only have come from the throat of someone in mortal distress.

As if by magic every scout sat bolt upright, as though they had been shot into that position by the action of a gigantic galvanic battery.

"Oh! what happened?" Landy was heard to call out in trembling tones.

"It's Johnny's trap!" whooped Lil Artha, all excitement.

CHAPTER V

THE KNIFE WITH THE BUCKHORN HANDLE

"EVERYBODY get out in a hurry!" called Elmer, suiting the action to the word himself by scrambling erect and making for the open door of the big barn.

It was far from light in there; but as they could easily see the opening all they had to do was to make for it. Elmer had been careful to make sure that there were no pitchforks lying around loose, to be run upon by accident.

Hardly had the scouts managed to stream from the interior of the barn than they became aware of the fact that someone was running headlong toward them. Toby threw himself into an attitude of defense, raising the piece of wood he had grasped for a club; but Elmer realized that the runner was approaching from the direction of the farmhouse and therefore must be a friend rather than a foe.

"Steady, boys, it must be Johnny!" he told his comrades as they clustered there.

Johnny it proved to be. The bound boy must have lain down on his cot fully dressed and equipped, for he had on even his cowhide boots,

and was minus only a hat. Of course, the boy was fairly brimming over with intense excitement.

"Didn't yuh hear him yell?" he was crying. "We've kotched the chicken thief fur sure, fellers. Whoop la! kim on, everybody, and nab him afore all the blood runs tuh his head!"

Lil Artha and Elmer, of course, had snatched up their guns, although they hardly believed they would find any use for the weapons. All of them started on the run toward the spot where the turkeys roosted in the favorite tree.

The sky was clouded over, and while it was not actually dark the boys had some little difficulty in seeing as well as they might have liked. Now and then one of the sprinters would stumble over some impediment, and perhaps measure his length on the ground, only to scramble erect again and tear after the rest.

It was usually clumsy Landy who met with these mishaps; but even such things did not seem to subdue his ambition to keep after the crowd.

Elmer was listening as he ran. He wondered why they did not already hear the groans or whines of the wretched thief who had been hung up by the heels without receiving a second's warning.

Remembering how Johnny had been whisked aloft, Elmer felt sure no one could be blamed for letting out that shriek when the catastrophe came about. Nor would he have thought it queer if the suspended rascal kept up his groans as he writhed and twisted in a vain effort to reach up

to the limb; which only a circus contortionist would have been able to do.

He imagined he heard some sort of sound ahead of them. But even at that Elmer could not be certain. It might be the night breeze sighing through the upper branches of the tall tree, or the alarmed turkeys holding a confab among themselves, for all he could tell.

But they were rapidly bearing down upon the spot now, and in another half minute ought to be where they could see the swaying figure of the caught thief.

"I don't seem to get him, Johnny!" ventured Lil Artha, in a disappointed tone.

"Huh! somethin' gone wrong I guess!" grunted the inventor; and if the tall scout could feel chagrin, fancy what a shock it must have been to Johnny when he realized that there was no dangling figure to greet him, despite that wild yell so full of mortal agony.

Perhaps already wise Elmer had begun to hazard a shrewd guess as to the why and wherefore of this vacancy. He was a great hand to see through things long before the answer became apparent to his chums. If this were so, at least he did not venture to say anything to them about it.

By now all of them, save slow-poke Landy, had arrived at the tree. They could hear the alarmed turkeys making some twittering sounds above, but if any of them had flown off the rest remained on their roosts.

Johnny had been smart enough to fetch his lan-

tern along. This he now proceeded to light, and as soon as the wick took fire he began to examine the trap.

"Dog-gone the luck, she went and broke on me!" he wailed, as though his boyish heart were almost broken by the catastrophe.

"That's what comes of not testing things beforehand!" said Toby, with the air of a wise-acre who knew it all; and yet Toby was himself a most notorious offender along those very same lines, as his chums could have informed the bound boy had they chosen to give a fellow-scout away.

"Gee whiz! he did test it, Toby," said Lil Artha, indignantly; "didn't we all of us see him ahangin' head-down. There's some sort of a mystery about it, that's what."

"Not much," said Elmer, who, while the others were talking, had been examining the end of the rope that lay on the ground near by; "it's been cut, that's all."

"Cut with a knife d'ye mean, Elmer?" cried Johnny, aghast.

"Just what it has," continued the patrol leader firmly; "you can see that with one eye, for the edges are smooth, and not ragged as they would be if the rope had broken a strand at a time."

Every fellow had to push up and examine it to make sure, and there was no dissenting voice after that. They knew Elmer was right, as he very nearly always appeared to be in matters like this.

"But say, however could he have twisted up to

get at the rope while he was hanging here by one leg, I'd like to know?" demanded Landy.

"Mebbe the second thief helped him git loose," suggested the bound boy.

"Just what happened as sure as anything," assented Elmer. "They were too smart for you that time, Johnny. Instead of running away when the alarm went off, this second fellow whipped out his blade, and finding the rope where it ran from the tree, he cut it."

"Then the other dropped down, and got his legs loose," added Toby. "See, here's the loop lying on the ground."

Sure enough, it was just as he said. The loop was there in plain sight, just as it had apparently been hurled aside by the trapped thief after he had a chance to use his hands.

Johnny was the most bitterly disappointed fellow Elmer had come across in a long time. He kept muttering to himself as he examined the fragment of rope. Lil Artha said he was "chewing the rag," whatever that might mean; but, at any rate, Johnny did not seem to be in a very happy frame of mind, so the operation could hardly have been of a pleasant nature.

"Now, I understand that second little rumble I heard," said Elmer. "It was just as Johnny reached us in front of the barn, and sounded like the barrel had started on again. That happened when the rope was cut, allowing the weighted hogshead to keep on a little further to the bottom of the drop."

"Let's see if you hit the nail on the head with that guess," suggested Toby, who liked to be convinced by his own eyesight when anything came to pass.

So, led by the inventor of the trap, they hurried to where the hogshead had been perched on the brink of the steep little descent. It could be seen at the bottom; and this confirmed the theory Elmer had advanced.

"And we didn't get a glimpse of the thieves after all," lamented Landy; "now I was hoping I'd see a fellow dangling there when we came up. Not that I'd like him to suffer *too* much, you know; but for Johnny's sake I wanted him to be nabbed."

"Yes, it's all off now," admitted Lil Artha.

"Of course, after that row they wouldn't be silly enough to come again for another try?" suggested Toby.

"Huh! that ole trap ain't no good after that mess," grunted Johnny, disdainfully. "I reckons as how I'll hev tuh think up sum other kind. But they ain't agoin' tuh git any o' them turks if I have to sot up all night, and borry a gun frum you fellers in the bargain."

"What's the matter with tying Moses the bulldog to the tree here?" remarked Elmer; "he's barking now at the kennel near the house. I'd certainly make use of the old dog if I were you, Johnny."

"Jest what I will do, Elmer. Moses ain't a great hand tuh bark, yuh see; bulls do the business with their teeth 'stead o' with their noise. But

he kin give tongue when he wants tuh. I'll fix him here fur the rest o' the night."

"How does it come the farmer hasn't shown up?" asked Mark, who thought it a bit queer Mr. Trotter displayed so little interest in the safe keeping of his young turkeys.

"Oh! him," chuckled Johnny; "nobody never ain't agoin' tuh get him waked up once he hits the hay. Talk tuh me baout sleepin', he kin beat anything yuh ever met. I bet yuh the missus is up and waitin' tuh know if we grabbed one."

"Do you think they got a turkey after all?" asked Landy, as he picked up several feathers from the ground near the tree.

"What do you say about that, Johnny?" Elmer inquired.

"Well, it daon't stand tuh reason he did," replied the other, gravely; "even if he had holt o' one at the time, he never'd a held on tuh hit arter that rope had slung him head down'ards. Guess I ort tuh know. If any o' yuh wants tuh feel what it's like, I'll rig the trap up agin in the mawnin' for yuh. Hold a turkey nawthin'. He couldn't even hold his breath, but had tuh give a yell like he was killed."

Indeed, they were all of pretty much the same opinion. No matter how brave a fellow the trespasser might be, when he met with such a sudden and unexpected upheaval as that running noose brought about, his wits were bound to desert him for the time being at least.

It may have been noticed also that no one, even

bold Lil Artha, the most venturesome of them all, volunteered to make the additional test when morning came. They seemed perfectly satisfied to accept the will for the deed. They had witnessed the speedy working of Johnny's trap, and evidently had no itching to try what it felt like to hang head downward from the limb of a tree, with a leg almost dislocated by a sudden jerking, powerful lever.

"Well, 'tain't no use acryin' over spilt milk, they sez," remarked Johnny, who, after all, seemed to be of a philosophical turn of mind; "the thing's done, an' that's all they is tuh hit. Might as well git Mose and fix him here tuh the tree. Them turks has jes' gut tuh be saved, no matter how much trouble it takes."

"Elmer, what are you thinking about?" asked Mark just then; for being used to the ways of his best chum he could see that the patrol leader was pondering something in his mind.

"If you want to know it was about that yell," Elmer admitted.

"A pretty husky whoop in the bargain, let me say," observed Lil Artha; "I used to think I could beat all creation letting out a yell, but that went one better, you hear me talking."

"Yes," added Toby, "it sounded as if the top of the world had blown off, the fellow made such a howl. Anyway, that's how it seemed to me when I was waked up so suddenly."

"Have we ever heard a whoop like that before?" asked Elmer.

"Now you're thinking of Hen Condit, of course, Elmer," came from Toby.

"Well, Hen's got a good strong pair of lungs, let me tell you," admitted Landy. "I remember the time that cow tossed him when he was a small boy, and say, he made everybody inside of half a mile run outdoors to see what was the matter. They found Hen straddlin' a limb of a tree, and whooping it up for all he was worth. It might have been him, Elmer, no telling."

"And just as well any other person badly scared," Mark observed. "I think I'd be able to do some fine work along those lines under the same conditions."

"Then it seems that we'll never be able to identify Hen by that shout," laughed Elmer; "but there's a way we can find something out, as all scouts ought to know."

That remark immediately put them all on their mettle.

"Sure thing, Elmer," agreed Lil Artha, "for, of course, you mean if we could find a trail around here we might pick out the different footprints; and one of us ought to know something about the kind of shoes Hen wears."

"That's me," admitted Landy, "because I happened to be going with Hen more or less lately. Show me the footprints and I'll tell you soon enough if it's him."

Of course, nothing could be done without the lantern, so they kept close to Johnny, who carried the same. From time to time he was given instruc-

tion how to hold the light so they might examine certain spots.

"Hello! Elmer's found something!" suddenly exclaimed keen-eyed Lil Artha, when he saw the scout leader stoop over almost under the tree, and alongside the large drygoods box.

"That so, Elmer; what was it?" several asked him in a breath.

"Gather around me," the other commanded, "and let's see if you can recognize what I picked up."

"Huh! bet you it fell from his pocket when he was dragged upside-down," was the way Lil Artha put it; quick to guess the truth, though he had not himself thought of this possibility before.

"Correct for you, Lil Artha, for that's what happened," Elmer acknowledged.

"Is it a knife, Elmer?" continued the tall scout.

"Once more you hit it," said the other; "and Landy, since you say you've been going more or less with Hen lately, perhaps you'd be apt to know his knife if you happened to set eyes on it?"

"To be sure I would, Elmer."

"You've handled it then, have you?"

"Lots of times, because you see I lost my own frog-sticker some weeks back, and I ain't had a birthday since to get a new one," Landy confessed.

"That sounds good to me," Elmer told him; "so now take a look at this, and tell us what you think."

With that he brought his hand around, having

been keeping it behind his back all this time. When he opened it there was disclosed a common, every-day jack-knife with a buckhorn handle, such as might be expected to be found in the pocket of almost any lad, and capable, when given a keen edge, of performing miracles in the way of shaving sticks and cutting up apples.

So Landy gravely, though eagerly, took up the knife. He opened the big blade and seemed interested in a certain nick he found there.

"Elmer, that settles it," he said, finally; "it's Hen's knife, I'm positive; and it must have been him that was hanging from this tree a bit ago!"

CHAPTER VI

BOUND FOR SASSAFRAS SWAMP

WHEN Landy Smith settled the matter in this convincing fashion, the rest of the scouts showed more or less interest in the outcome.

"That proves one thing," asserted Toby; "Hen Condit is up here, all right."

"It proves a whole lot of things, according to my opinion," added Lil Artha as he nodded his head in a way he had of emphasizing his remarks; "it tells us Hen is in bad company, for the second fellow must be the man he was seen with the other day in Hickory Ridge town."

"According to my notion, fellows," said Mark, seriously, "the hand of that same unknown man stands back of all poor Hen's troubles. Until that party was seen in this part of the country, Hen didn't seem to have a single worry. He was always as light-hearted a chap as you could find in a week of Sundays."

"What under the sun can it mean?" queried Landy, looking distressed; because, truth to tell, he and the missing scout had been getting quite fond of one another lately, and the shock had told upon Landy much more than any other boy belonging to the Wolf Patrol.

"I tell you what I think," ventured Ted Burgoyne just then; "that man mutht have hypnotized Hen. I don't thee how elth he could make him do whatever he wants. Yeth, I even believe he forced Hen to wite that letter. Needn't laugh, Lil Artha, I've been reading it all up lately, and there are thome queer happeningth along the line of hypnothism."

"Elmer, how about that; do you believe in it?" asked Lil Artha, who was known to be pretty much of a scoffer in his way.

"I decline to commit myself—just yet at any rate," laughed the patrol leader. "I confess that queer things do happen, and a fellow who always refuses to believe because he doesn't understand is silly. But we do know this unknown man has some kind of influence over our chum; what it is we're going to find out before we're many days older."

"I like to hear you say that, Elmer," cried Landy, "because I just seem to believe the thing's more'n half done when you put *your* hand to the plough. I can't help but think how poor Hen must be feeling right now, after getting himself in such a fix."

"How about those tracks we started out to find?" asked Toby just then.

"We'll give another look before closing shop," replied the patrol leader. "Just fetch the lantern over, Johnny; they'd be apt to head away from the barn."

It was really in the direction of the near-by

swamp that they now commenced to look. The wisdom of Elmer's figuring was soon made manifest, for they quickly ran across what they were looking for.

"Here you are," said Elmer, "and now get busy, Landy."

"Yes, drop down on your marrow-bones and see what you make of the footprints," Lil Artha told the fat scout.

Now Landy had had fair training in certain kinds of work associated with scout-craft. He had even taken numerous lessons in following a trail, though giving poor promise of ever being a shining light in that respect.

"Please hold the lantern closer, Johnny," he said, as he thrust his nose down near the ground; "yes, here's a footprint as clear as anybody'd want to see; and I sure ought to know the person who made the same."

"Tell us why, Landy?" asked Elmer, with a pleased smile.

"That's an easy thing to do, Elmer. You see that diagonal mark across the toe of this impression—well, that's caused by a patch on the left shoe. All right, Hen Condit had just such a patch put on his shoe a week ago last Saturday."

"You know that for a fact, do you, Landy?" questioned the patrol leader, who did not want any guessing about this business.

"Why, I sat there all the time the cobbler was working at the same, having accompanied Hen to the shoemaker's shop," continued Landy.

"What's more I joshed him about the fine and dandy track he made every time he stepped in some half-hard mud that day after he left the shop. Oh! I'm as sure of this footprint as I am that my name's Landy Smith."

"Well, then, we've had double evidence," spoke up Ted Burgoyne; "and I gueth that ought to thettle the matter. Ith our Hen that was dragged up by the heelth. Elmer, will it pay uth to try and follow the trail?"

"Hardly just now, at any rate, Ted," the other told him. "We might aim to do something of the kind in the morning. But even here it looks as if they headed for the swamp. That's a point to remember, boys."

Perhaps several of the scouts were just as well satisfied. The idea of starting out on a trail that might soon take them into a dismal swamp, and at midnight in the bargain, with a cloudy sky overhead, did not appeal very strongly to Landy, Toby and Chatz.

Accordingly, they turned back, heading for the friendly barn, attracted, doubtless, by fond memories of those comfortable beds in the sweet hay.

"How about the bulldog, Johnny?" asked Elmer, as they reached the barn entrance.

"I'm meanin' tuh git Mose up yonder, and tie him tuh the tree," replied the boy. "Them turks hes gut tuh be looked arter, if I hes tuh stay up all night tuh do the trick. An' lemme tell yuh, Elmer, I kin make up another trap jest as cunnin'

as any ole fox. I'll git 'em yit if so be they keep hangin' 'raound these parts."

"I believe you would, Johnny," assented the other, who realized that the bound boy was displaying several good traits that would carry him along through the world once his time of bondage with the farmer was up.

There being no reason why they should keep away from their sleeping quarters any longer, the seven scouts entered the barn.

"Wow! but it's plumb dark in here, though!" protested Lil Artha, after he had knocked his shins twice against some projection, and even slammed into a post that chanced to be directly in his way.

"We'd better stand still for a little while, so as to let our eyes get used to the gloom," suggested Elmer; "it's always that way when you step into one of the moving-picture places, you remember; but a few minutes later you can see all around you. Better waste a little time than a lot of cuticle."

"Just so," grunted Lil Artha; "already half an inch of skin has been barked off my shin, and my nose is swelling where I banged the same against that awful post."

"Well," remarked Toby, whose ankles had *not* been bruised and who consequently could even think to joke about the matter, "it's probably the first time then Lil Artha was ever left at the post. But I can see a heap better already."

All of them found that their eyesight soon be-

came accustomed to the gloom; and that it was not so very bad after all. They had just managed to reach the place where their traps were left, and started burrowing in the hay again, when Elmer called their attention to certain suggestive sounds outside.

"That must be Johnny and the bull pup going past on the way to the turkey roost," ventured Mark, as they plainly caught a whine, and then a low growl that was vicious enough to make one's blood turn cold.

"If those fellows should be reckless enough to come back to make a second try for young turkey," Landy was saying, as though he could not keep his mind from grappling with Hen Condit and his troubles, "they'll be some surprised when that ferocious old Mose grabs them by the legs, and holds on like everything."

"For one, now," admitted Toby, "I'd want to be excused from any session with the big white teeth of Mose that stick out from his lower jaw. But if you asked me my opinion I'd say one scare a night was as much as any ordinary chicken thief could put up with."

"Nothing doing," muttered Lil Artha, showing that he, too, was of the same mind as the companion scout.

At least it was very evident none of the boys expected being disturbed again in their slumbers, for they went about settling down as though they meant to enjoy a good long session.

"Don't wake me too early, mother dear," Toby

was heard to say, half to himself, "for to-morrow won't be the first of May, and I'm not to be the queen of the occasion either. So please let me have my snooze out, everybody."

Nothing did occur to disturb their slumbers which doubtless were additionally sweet after that one break.

Elmer had them all up when he considered that it was right and proper. True, the sun was only peeping above the horizon, and the birds still twittered amidst the shrubbery near by; but Elmer knew what great hands farm people are about getting up betimes, and he did not wish to keep Mrs. Trotter's breakfast waiting for any sleepyheads.

The grumbling ceased as if by magic the moment he mentioned that word "breakfast," and Lil Artha immediately announced himself as being wide-awake.

"H'm! seems like I could even smell the batter cakes frying right now, fellows," he told them, with a smack of his lips. "Notice that I scorn to give them the well-known name of flapjacks on this festive occasion, because we're going to eat at a regular table, under a hospitable roof; and it's only when in camp that wheat cakes are called flapjacks."

"A rose by any other name would smell as sweet," chortled Toby.

"Yes, but if you kept calling it an onion you'd soon *think* it didn't," affirmed Lil Artha; "but say, do you reckon that bell was meant for us?

Oh! where's my other shoe; they pinched me, so I took 'em off in the middle of the night, and the left one has gone and hid in the hay."

"Mebbe the rats got away with it, Lil Artha," suggested Landy, wickedly; "I'm certain I heard 'em squeakin' all around here; and they like shoe for breakfast."

It turned out, however, that there was no damage done; the missing foot-wear was soon discovered under a wisp of hay, and quickly the tall scout crept out in the wake of his six comrades.

A second time the bell was heard, and at that they all started on a run for the rear of the house, where several tin basins, and some soap, as well as clean towels announced that the farmer's good wife had gotten things ready for them.

Lil Artha had guessed right; perhaps his keen scent had discovered the odor of pancakes in the air, for they were in plain sight, several pyramids of the golden beauties, with a pitcher of real maple syrup, and plenty of fresh butter to go with the same.

Mrs. Trotter may only have had three little girls of her own, but she certainly had been brought up in a family where there were boys, because she knew so well what their weaknesses were.

What with three fried eggs apiece, guaranteed strictly home-grown and fresh; a great rasher of sweet ham, also a product of the farm; coffee, with genuine cream in the same, a dish of oatmeal, and then those steaming stacks of cakes, it was a

wonder some of those scouts were not completely foundered.

Elmer had more or less difficulty in coaxing Lil Artha away from the table. The elongated scout could hardly breathe, he was so full; but he heaved many a sigh as he noticed that a fresh plateful of those unexcelled pancakes had just been put on, with no one left to do them justice.

Shaking his head sadly, Lil Artha finally managed to get on his feet and leave the dining-room. His last look back spoke volumes; it said as plainly as anything those wonderfully expressive words: "though lost to sight, to memory dear;" and probably never again in the course of human events would Lil Artha equal the astounding record he made that same morning of thirteen pancakes straight.

Elmer knew they would have a big day ahead of them, and was really anxious to get started. He had made arrangements with the farmer and his wife to supply such provisions as they could conveniently carry along with them for a couple of days, while they were combing the big Sassafras Swamp in hopes of coming across the two parties they sought.

If the Chief of Police in Hickory Ridge, with others to help him, should put in an appearance, Elmer hoped they might be given such information as lay in the power of Mr. Trotter.

"We are not hoggish, you must know, Mr. Trotter," he told the farmer, as they were making their last preparations before starting forth;

"much as we want to be the ones who will round up these two lurkers in Sassafras Swamp, if the police come to take a hand in the chase we wish them every luck. Yes, and what's more we stand ready as true scouts to lend them a helping hand."

"All we want," added Ted, seriously, "ith a chance to athist our chum Hen. We believe him to be under thome influence, and tho we're bent on breaking hith chains."

Each of the seven boys had a certain load to carry besides his rubber poncho, and his pack was supposed to hold the extra food supplies as well. Some people on seeing what these consisted of might imagine the swamp hunters meant to spend a very long time in their search; but then such persons would in that way betray their gross ignorance as to what a growing boy's appetite amounts to. They were taking no chances of starvation; and two whole days meant at least three times that many full meals, with sundry bites in between.

From what Elmer had learned through Johnny Spreen, it was possible to navigate a fair portion of the swamp with a boat. They had several flat-bottomed skiffs that were used for that purpose, usually by the boy in his fur-hunting expeditions during the fall and winter seasons.

Unfortunately, things were so much behind at the farm that Johnny could not be spared to accompany them. Elmer had hinted at this, not because he feared his own ability to get around,

but because Johnny's being along would save them much precious time.

When the scout leader had soaked in all possible information the bound boy was capable of delivering, he believed he was in a fair way to master the situation. If Hen and his unknown captor were still hiding anywhere in the big swamp, Elmer fancied they could be found. What was going to happen after that event came about, of course, he could not say just then.

They made their way along for some distance until near the place where the three flat-bottomed skiffs were kept tied up. It was here that Johnny made a sudden discovery that gave them all a little thrill.

CHAPTER VII

THE MISSING SKIFF

"WELL, I swan!" was the sudden exclamation that broke from the lips of Johnny Spreen, the farmer's bound boy, as he came to a halt.

Elmer, glancing hastily at him, saw the boy rubbing his eyes in a somewhat dazed fashion. He acted for all the world like a fellow who did not feel sure that his sight was as good as usual. Something evidently was amiss.

"What is it?" demanded Lil Artha, in his usual impetuous way.

"The boats!" muttered Johnny Spreen.

"Sure thing, we see 'em!" declared the tall scout.

"How many kin yuh count, tell me?" asked the other, beseechingly, still giving an occasional dab at his eyes, as though doubts clung to his mind regarding their faithfulness.

"Why, let's see, I glimpse three—no, there are only two skiffs afloating in that little bayou," Lil Artha told him.

"Only two, air yuh dead sartin?" continued Johnny.

"That's correct, two boats and no more. I c'n

see each one as clear as anything. Why, what difference does that make, Johnny?" asked Toby.

"But ther ought tuh be *three,* I tells yuh," insisted the bound boy; "wun two-year old, another built larst season, and the last un just this Spring. Yessir, three on 'em in all."

"Well, I gueth your old boat took a notion to go to the bottom then, Johnny," asserted Ted, "becauth there are only a pair floating there, I give you my word."

"They was every wun thar yist'day," persisted Johnny.

"Are you sure of that?" Elmer asked him.

"Well, my name's Johnny Spreen, ain't it?" demanded the other, grimly; "I'm workin' out my time with Mister Trotter hyar, ain't I? Then I still got two eyes, and I ain't turned loony yit by a long shot. I tell yuh, Elmer, I handled three skiffs yist'day—seen as they was tied securely. And now yuh tells me they be but two."

"Yes, that's a fact," the patrol leader assured him.

"All right then, they gut one, thet's boz."

Elmer expected some such result as this, so after all he did not seem to be very much staggered.

"I suppose by 'them' you mean the chicken thieves, Johnny?" he remarked.

"No other."

"But if the man has been moving around in the swamp for a couple of weeks, more or less,

could he do without a boat all that time?" continued the leader.

"I guess he cud, Elmer, though w'en yuh wants tuh trap muskrats yuh need sum sort o' craft the wust kind. P'raps he didn't chanct tuh run across our skiffs up tuh last night. Then agin mebbe he was askeered tuh snatch one, fur fear we'd hunt arter it, an' bother him in the swamp."

"All right, Johnny, I believe you're barking up the proper tree," said Elmer; "but it looks as if the man changed his mind last night, and took a boat."

"Yep, an' by gosh! the newest one o' the lot, too!" groaned the bound boy, as he led them closer to where the other skiffs floated, secured to stakes.

"After all that row," suggested Lil Artha, "it might be they thought we'd give a quick chase, and they couldn't afford to take any more chances. So as a boat'd come in handy for them they gobbled it."

"Anybody'd pick the best in the bunch, come to that," added wise Toby.

"I don't know about that," Mark went on to say; "a really smart fellow would be apt to reason that if he took only the old tub the owner mightn't think it worth while to make much of a hunt for it, not caring whether he got the same again or not."

"I consider that sound reasoning, Mark," observed the patrol leader, who was never happier than when he found some of his followers dis-

playing good judgment in such matters. "But the boat's gone, and our next duty is to take a look around the bank before we get to trampling things up too much. We ought to make sure of things by finding that marked track again."

"It can be done as easy as turning a handspring," vowed Toby Jones, as all of them immediately spread out, fan-shape, like hounds that had lost the scent temporarily, and were searching for it again.

Hardly half a minute had gone when there was an exultant cry raised.

"Didn't I say so?" demanded Toby, triumphantly; "but I never thought Landy of all fellows'd be the one to find the trail."

"Oh! sometimes queer things do happen in this world," asserted the fat scout, swelling with his triumph; "they say the race ain't always to the swift. But take a look, everybody, and see if I'm right."

They looked and unanimously pronounced Landy's judgment correct. There was the imprint of a shoe, a *left* shoe in the bargain, beyond doubt, and anyone who had eyes could detect that diagonal mark running across the sole, which Landy had pointed out before as the line of the new leather, placed there while he waited for Hen Condit in the Italian cobbler's shop.

"As plain as the nose on your face, Landy!" admitted Lil Artha, with a trifle of disappointment in his voice, for he had calculated on discovering the tracks himself, and for one who was

next door to a greenhorn to do it humiliated the tall scout.

"No personal remarks, please, Lil Artha," said Landy; "I know my nose isn't as prominent as yours, and some others in the crowd, but it answers my purpose all right, and I'm not ashamed of it."

"Well, now we know where we're at," remarked Ted, with a satisfied air, as though it might be a maxim with him to always start right.

"And it's up to us to divide our forces, choose our boats, and make a start," Mark Cummings was saying.

"Ginger! don't I on'y wish I cud be goin' along!" said Johnny Spreen with an expression on his face that could only be described as compound disappointment.

"All of us would be glad if you were, Johnny," Elmer told him, feeling for the boy, whose company would certainly be of considerable help to the expedition, for Johnny knew the watery paths and the tangles of Sassafras Swamp as, perhaps, no other fellow possibly could, since he had long haunted its recesses, laying traps, and looking for new haunts of the wily muskrats.

"As there are seven of us, all told," remarked Lil Artha, "that means three in one boat, and four in the other. Elmer, you divide up. This newer skiff looks to me just a weenty bit the bigger."

"It is by a foot, and wider, too," asserted Johnny, quickly.

"Then it ought to carry four, of course; but how's this, Johnny, where are the oars for both craft; I don't see any!"

"Shucks! we don't use oars in the ole swamp," declared the other. "A push pole's the best way tuh git along. Yuh see it's soft mud everywhar, and so we cuts poles with a crotch at the end. That keeps 'em frum sinking deep in the mud, so yuh kin git a chanct tuh shove."

"And a mighty good idea, too," avowed Toby; "I've had a little experience with just plain every-day push poles, and even got hung up when one stuck in the mud, so the boat left me. But Elmer, how'll we divide?"

The patrol leader glanced over his force. It was only fair that he arrange it so the weight would be as nearly equal as possible.

"Lil Artha, take Mark and Landy in the smaller skiff; the rest will go with me," he announced immediately.

Mark was the nearest chum of the patrol leader, but Elmer disliked favoritism, and hence he thus tacitly placed Lil Artha in command of the second boat. But then there was also another good reason for doing this, since the tall scout had always shown himself to be clever on the water, much more so than the bugler of the troop.

Johnny was already showing them how to pull the skiffs in by means of a rope attached to each. It was a good way of mooring them when not in use.

"Yuh see the third boat was drawed up on the

shore here," he remarked in a disconsolate tone; " 'cause I was ausin' her right along. I guess that's the reason they took the best o' the lot."

When the two boats had been brought to the shore, packs were distributed in the same, according to the directions of the leader. These were not hastily tossed aboard, but placed where they would be out of the way of the one who was using the long push-pole.

"Thank goodneth we've got our camp hatchet along," remarked Ted, as he took his place, "tho even if we do lose or bweak our pole we can alwayth cut another one."

"Yep, I never go intuh the swamp without my hatchet," asserted Johnny. "Yuh see it comes in mighty handy when yuh want tuh make a fire, or cut a way through sum tangled snarl o' brush. Then, besides, I find a use fur the same in setting traps, fur mushrats ain't ther on'y kind o' fur we bags araound these diggin's."

Some of the boys might have liked keeping up the talk, especially when it bordered on such an interesting subject. Elmer, however, knew that time was valuable to them just then, with such a difficult task ahead. They had to find two parties who were secreted somewhere in the swamp; and as Lil Artha declared it was "pretty much like looking for a needle in a haystack."

Johnny stood there on the bank, and waved his hat to the scouts as he watched them poling away. They could almost imagine they heard the tremendous sigh that came from his breast as he saw

a glorious chance for real fun pass from his grasp.

"Good-bye, an' good luck tuh yuh all!" he called out.

Following the serpentine passage of clear water, the two boats soon passed from the sight of the bound boy, though doubtless he could still hear gurgling sounds as the push-poles were worked, and the flat prows of the skiffs passed over the numerous water-lily pads.

And now the swamp was before them.

All of the scouts surveyed the scene with lively anticipations. They could easily understand that the immediate future might throw all manner of strange adventures across their path, and, like most boys, Elmer and his chums were ever hungry for exciting things to happen—it was in the blood.

But, then, at first the borders of the big Sassafras Swamp did not look so very forbidding. Elmer warned them not to expect that this condition of affairs would last long.

"You remember what Johnny told us," he remarked so that all of them could hear his words; "it keeps getting worse the further you go in. Things are easy to begin with, but after a while we'll have our hands full. Above all things we must keep our heads about us, for if we do that we'll escape getting lost."

"Then Johnny did admit a fellow could get lost in this place, did he?" inquired Landy, uneasily.

"He used to lose his way often when he first started coming in here after muskrats," confessed

Elmer; "and then he began to have some system about his excursions so that by degrees he got it all down pat."

"Yes, Johnny said he believed he could pole a boat pretty much into the heart of Sassafras with his eyes shut or bandaged," remarked Lil Artha.

"Too bad he couldn't get off and be along with us," lamented Landy; "and Elmer, if we'd only promised Farmer Trotter five dollars a day he'd have let his help join us, I'm sure of that."

"Huh! too bad you didn't think of that before, Landy, and put it up to Elmer," jeered Lil Artha; "but I wouldn't bother too much about it if I was you. Chances are we won't get lost much; and by the same token, even if we do it'll be some kind of a sensation to wake us up."

Landy scratched his head, but not knowing how much of this was intended by his tormentor he did not reply. As they were gradually working further into the dense growth by now there was enough around them to chain their attention and arouse their interest.

In some places they could see that the shore stood above the sluggish water, although covered for the most part with dense shrubbery that would be difficult to pass through. Channels began to be met with running to the right and left, so that it behooved Elmer to remember the explicit directions given by the muskrat trapper if he wished to avoid getting side-tracked in the start.

Lil Artha, in the other boat, was also using his

knowledge of woodcraft to some purpose. When it happened that the two skiffs came alongside he called out to Elmer, as if to settle some point he had in mind.

"Even if I hadn't listened when Johnny was laying down the law to us about the main channel in here, Elmer, I reckon I'd had no trouble stickin' to the same, up to now, anyhow."

"Why tho, Lil Artha?" asked Ted Burgoyne.

"It's just this way," continued the other, briskly, as though only too willing to show his hand, "you see Johnny has followed the same passage in here so often now he's actually gone and left a trail behind him."

"Say, what are you giving us, Lil Artha?" demanded Toby; "on shore a trail is all very well, but the water leaves none. Once it settles down after a boat's passed, I defy anybody to tell a thing about the same."

Lil Artha grinned as though he really pitied the dense ignorance of some people.

"You've got another think coming, Toby," he said, drily. "I suppose if you sat down and racked your poor brain a whole week you'd be no nearer knowing what I mean, so I'll have to explain."

"Guess you will, that," muttered Toby; "if you know yourself what you're getting at, which I doubt."

"Looky there," said the skipper of the second skiff, "do you notice that where we make this turn to the left the bushes along the point are kind of

frayed, like something had rubbed against 'em a heap of times?"

"Why, yes, it does seem so," admitted Toby, reluctantly.

"All right then," continued Lil Artha; "if you'd kept your eyes about you all the while you'd seen that same thing at near every turn. Trying to cut short when he poled along, Johnny has left a track of his passage at every bend. I always look sharp, and I can tell as easy as falling off a log whether he went on, or cut into another passage. And Elmer will bear me out on that explanation, too!"

CHAPTER VIII

PICKING UP CLUES

THE leader of the Wolf Patrol laughed when he heard Lil Artha make this remark.

"Every word that you are saying, Lil Artha, is the truth," he announced. "I've been watching those ragged edges of bushes myself. You see, the time might come after a while when I'd get mixed on the directions given by Johnny Spreen. Then I'd want to have some other scheme so as to find my way."

"But after a bit, Elmer, we'll get to a spot where Johnny changed his course from one day to another, as he went to different traps; how're we meaning to regulate our hunt then?" asked Toby.

"We've got to search the best way we can for the missing skiff," Elmer explained. "If only we can find it hauled up somewhere on the bank we'll know they went ashore at that point, don't you see?"

"Why, how eathy!" declared Ted, evidently lost in admiration for the simplicity of the scheme, that could never have occurred to him before.

"Oh! then, if that's the case I reckon we'd bet-

ter not be making quite so much racket as we go along," said Mark.

"I was just going to remark about that," the patrol leader added. "If all of a sudden we found the boat, and had been talking loud, or laughing, the chances are the game would give us the slip. So after this whoever is doing the pushing try not to splash more than you can help; and when you talk do it in whispers."

Perhaps all this mystery added to the pleasure of such a fellow as Lil Artha; at least his eyes were sparkling much more than their wont as he continued to ply his pole with the air of a Venetian gondolier along the Grand Canal.

Once, however, he must have rammed it too hard into the yielding ooze, for when he tried to pull it out there was considerable resistance. Lil Artha managed to stop the moving skiff in time to save himself; even then he might have been pulled overboard only that watchful Mark, anticipating something of the sort, threw his arms around the long legs of the pusher, and held on grimly until the pole could be extricated.

An hour, two of them had slipped by since parting from Johnny Spreen. They were now in the heart of the swamp. All around them lay a solemn silence broken only by the splash of a bullfrog leaping from a bank, the gurgle of some water snake or the solemn croak of a bittern fishing near by, followed by the flap of its wings as it flew away, alarmed by their approach.

All of the boys were more or less impressed by

this strange silence. It seemed as though some heavy weight were pressing down upon them. Toby even whispered to one of his mates that it could hardly be worse if they were passing through a country graveyard at midnight.

At the same time, all of them being bright, wide-awake fellows, there were plenty of interesting things continually cropping up to arouse their interest as scouts. Every minute or so someone was calling attention to this or that thing, though never forgetting the need of caution.

If at any time a voice was raised more than Elmer deemed wise, a single "hist" from his lips caused the speaker to moderate his tones instantly.

By now they were not so much concerned about where they went as the possibility of finding the missing skiff. Eager eyes were ever on the alert. A number of times Lil Artha, or it might be Toby or Chatz, felt a sudden thrill as some object caught their attention ahead, which at first glance seemed to open up great possibilities. Then as they moved closer and a better chance came to investigate, deep disappointment and chagrin would follow; for after all it turned out to be only the end of a log, or some such simple thing, and not the stern of the old skiff at all.

Elmer happened to be a little ahead of the other boat at the time Chatz, consulting his nickel watch, found it was just ten o'clock. When he showed this to Toby the latter grinned as though very much pleased.

"I nominated ten, didn't I, Chatz?" he remarked in a low tone; "when you asked me to take a squint up at the sun, and say what the hour might be?"

"You certainly hit it that time in the bull's-eye, suh," admitted the Southern lad; "and I confess that I thought it half an hour later. I'm still some shy, it seems, on telling time by the sun and stars."

A low hiss from Elmer just then, as he wielded the pole, caused the two scouts to stop talking, and turn their attention to what was going on. The first thing they discovered was that the skiff was now heading for the near shore. Then looking further the boys could see that evidently someone must have camped there, for to the practiced eye many things indicated as much.

When the prow of the flat-bottomed boat ran gently up on the shore, at a low order from the skipper, Ted, who happened to be further up in the bow than any of the others, jumped to the land and began to draw the skiff up.

There was a bank several feet high just beyond, but Ted waited until the others had also disembarked before attempting to ascend this. By now the other boat had also reached shore, with its crew tumbling out, though avoiding any sign of confusion, for they were pretty well drilled in the elements of obedience to orders, as all true scouts should be.

No sooner had the boys gained the higher ground than they readily discovered that it had

been the site of a camp at some time in the not far-distant past.

A number of things told them this, chief of which might be mentioned the little pile of dead ashes that lay in plain sight. They could even see the sticks that the unknown party had used when cooking some sort of meat close to the red coals.

All of them gathered around. Elmer gravely examined the ashes, while the others eagerly waited to hear his decision.

"Quite some time old," said the leader at last, having figured out the solution by means of certain rules well known to those who have made woodcraft a study. "At least a couple of rains have passed over since this fire was left. There are no footprints that I can see. That also goes to show it was some time ago; but I think it was only one person who camped here."

He pointed as he spoke to where soft hemlock browse had been gathered as if for the purpose of forming a couch; and there being but a single bed even Landy could guess Elmer was correct when he said one party had made the temporary camp.

"Then it must have been the unknown man," said Lil Artha, "and our chum Hen wasn't along at the time."

They moved around as if looking for further signs, because scouts are always keen to find tell-tale marks that will add to the size of the edifice they are building up, founded partly on conjecture and also on "give-away" facts.

Lil Artha it was who emitted a low whistle, and the others glancing up, well knowing that he must have made some sort of important discovery, saw him waving one of his hands to them—he held the Marlin double-barrel with the other, of course.

"See that?" he told them when they reached his side amidst the bushes adjacent to the little opening where the long-cold fire ashes lay.

"Feathers, for a cookey!" exclaimed Toby, "and a heap of the same, too."

"Now we know what he cooked on the ends of those sticks!" observed Mark.

"Yeth, and now we know where one of Farmer Trotter's henth went to," added Ted.

"This is more than Johnny ever ran across," remarked Lil Artha, "because he only guessed the chicken thief was hiding in the swamp, for he'd seen tracks. Hold on, he did say there was ashes, too, at the place he picked up that filed half-circle of steel, but it must have been in a different place from this."

"Well, it's only a little incident after all," said Elmer, "and doesn't tell us much that we didn't know before."

"Only that we're on the track of those lost chickens, you know," chuckled the tall scout. "But see here, Elmer, if they made a fizzle of their raid last night, how d'ye suppose they're going to keep from starving to death in here?"

"Ask me something easy, please," retorted the other; "though if I was in their place I think I could manage to keep alive. There are lots of

ways for doing that, if you only stop to think."

"Sure there are," spoke up Toby, eager to show that he had learned his lesson fairly well, even though not claiming to be as expert at some things as were Elmer and Lil Artha. "Now, with some cord and a bait I reckon rabbits could be trapped or snared. Then gray squirrels are plenty in here, if only you found a nest of the same in a hollow tree."

"And," added Landy with a yearning vein in his voice, "haven't we seen whopping big greenback bullfrogs aplenty? If there's one dish I'm fond of more than any other, that's fried frogs' legs. Yum! yum, don't I wish we could spare the time to knock over a dozen of those bullies."

"Not while we're on such a duty as we started out to fulfill, Landy," Elmer advised the fat scout.

"Then there are fish in these waters, too, fat sunfish as big as any I ever set eyes on," continued Toby; "and when you're hungry they taste prime, though I hate the bones, and came near choking to death once on a sunny. Worse than pickerel, according to my mind, and that's saying a lot. Oh! I guess a smart fellow with matches to make fires, could manage to keep the wolf from his door in here all right."

"But all men are not up to one-tenth of the resources known to Boy Scouts," ventured Elmer, "which is why they generally have to rely on staving off hunger by raiding the chicken roosts of

poor farmers. That'll be enough for this time. Suppose we get aboard again, and continue our exploration of Sassafras Swamp."

"It's a sure-enough big patch of mud and water and brush and mystery," admitted Mark, as they began to climb into the boats again as before.

"And from what Johnny told me we haven't seen as much as a tenth of the place yet," Elmer assured them; whereat there were all sorts of incredulous looks to the right and to the left, as though the magnitude of their task might by this time be making a stronger impression on the boys' minds.

A change was made in pushers as they started off once more. It turned out to be no child's play handling that long, heavy pole which had a faculty for clinging to the ooze below the surface of the water, and necessitating more or less exertion in order to drag it loose each time it was used.

Landy had not taken his turn as yet. It really looked as though Lil Artha was a little afraid of the fat scout, for he and Mark had alternated in doing the work. Landy was not complaining at all. Indeed, Lil Artha felt sure he could see a satisfied grin upon the rubicund face of the happy-go-lucky, fat scout from time to time as he heard the one at the pole puffing with the exertion.

Perhaps in the end it would prove to be a case of the "last straw on the camel's back," and Lil Artha, casting discretion to the winds, would feel impelled to thrust the push-pole into the inexperienced hands of Landy Smith. He was evidently

putting off the evil hour as long as he could, fearful of consequences.

So noon came and found them well into the depths of Sassafras Swamp.

They went ashore to eat their lunch, Lil Artha begging that they have a small fire and make a pot of coffee.

"I c'n pick up aplenty of real dry wood, you know, Elmer," he went on to say in his wheedling way, "so that there ain't going to be hardly a whiff of smoke that anybody could see with a field glass. And say, when you're all tuckered out with pushing a boat through the grass and lily-pads, nothing makes you feel so fine as a brimming cup of coffee. So please say yes, Mister Scout Master!"

Of course, Elmer could not resist such a piteous plea as that.

"You could wring tears from a stone, Lil Artha," he told the other, laughingly, "when you put on a face like that. I reckon we might have a small cooking fire and a pot of coffee. None of us would object to it, and sandwiches are dry eating all by themselves, even when you're hungry. So go ahead; but no chopping, mind; break all the small stuff you gather over your knee."

Landy eagerly assisted, though Lil Artha kept a watchful eye on what he gathered lest he mix in green stuff that would make a black smoke when it burned. Another scout managed to find a stick with a crotch that would hold the coffee-pot over the blaze until it had boiled.

The scouts were not in the habit of putting up with such apologies for comfort as these; as a rule, when they camped out they had tents, blankets, and a little spider contraption that folded up in small compass, and which served as a gridiron stove, being placed over the red coals, with cooking utensils resting on the bars.

The coffee was thoroughly enjoyed by everyone, and a vote of thanks taken for Lil Artha, who had first suggested making it. Resting for a short time afterwards, the boys felt refreshed when once more the task was taken up.

Lil Artha looked at Landy tumbling contentedly into the middle of the old skiff, and seemed on the point of saying something; then he shook his head and picked up the push-pole himself.

"Not yet, but soon it's just got to be; only I hope he won't upset us all," Mark heard the tall scout mutter to himself, nor did he need a further hint to know what was passing through Lil Artha's mind; Landy was not going to evade his share of the arduous labor forever.

It, doubtless, took considerable thinking and planning on the part of Elmer to make sure they did not "repeat." So far, none of the boys could say as they moved along that they had ever before seen the stretch of water and scrubby shore, covered with trees and vines.

This spoke volumes for the smartness of the young patrol leader, though somehow his chums did not seem to consider it such a wonderful feat for Elmer. That is the penalty for being success-

ful; others expect great things from such a comrade, so that he is constantly put to his best efforts to satisfy them.

It must have been quite some time, perhaps as much as two hours after they had stopped to eat their lunch when without warning the swamp explorers met with a surprise that gave them a new thrill.

At the time, Lil Artha happened to have passed a little in the lead, though he would soon be dropping back again, especially when there came a chance to make a mistake in direction, for he wanted Elmer to decide such puzzles.

The tall scout must have forgotten his warning from Elmer, for he cried out:

"Hey! everybody look what we're up against! A bear, Elmer, that's what it is!"

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CHAPTER IX

THE PERILS OF THE WATER LABYRINTH

"SILENCE, everybody!" hissed Elmer, who knew it would be just like Toby, and perhaps some of the other fellows, to burst into a shout as soon as they could get command of their voices.

It was certainly a bear, a small one to be sure, but genuine enough, and not such as can be seen with wandering foreigners, taught to dance, or wield a pole as a soldier would his musket.

Just when the scouts glimpsed the hairy denizen of Sassafras Swamp, he was engaged in sitting on his haunches and gathering in the bushes with his sturdy forelegs. To Lil Artha, it looked as though Bruin might be making a lunch from the luscious, big blueberries that grew in such abundance here and there through the swamp.

Up to the moment when Lil Artha thus called attention to the presence of the black native, the bear must have been in ignorance of their being so near at hand. When he did notice them, he simply gave a disgusted grunt, and ambled away through the brush. Lil Artha always declared the bear glanced back at them as he ran, and even put out his tongue, just as if he knew it was the close

season, and that a kind game law protected him from all harm.

"Say, let me tell you this old Sassy swamp isn't such a bad place for a game preserve after all," said Toby; "I think some of us could enjoy having a week up here, after the law on bears and all such was up. But it's too far from home during the school session, for us to come."

"Oh! I don't know about that," remarked the tall scout, meditatively; "we could borrow a car, and start in the middle of the night when there was a moon. That'd give us a whole day up here. Take it at Thanksgiving and we could make it three, with Friday and Saturday thrown in. Elmer, think it over, won't you?"

"Plenty of time for that," he was assured; "We've got our hands full as it is, without borrowing trouble."

"And perwaps before we're done with it," Ted croaked, "you'll be that tired of seeing nothing but thwamp all around, that you'll vow never again for yourth."

"I'm going to make a proposition, Elmer," said Landy; "and I hope you'll agree. Suppose we go ashore and tackle some of those elegant blueberries ourselves? It's a shame that bears should be the only ones to enjoy such a feast. And it's tough sitting here so long!"

At that Lil Artha grunted, and looking almost savagely at the speaker nodded his head while he muttered:

"That settles it, my boy; I see your finish.

You're going to earn your salt after this, no matter what happens!"

Elmer seemed to consider for a few seconds.

"I see no reason why we shouldn't pull up for a little while, just as you say, Landy," he observed, to the delight of the rest; "and everyone of us is fond of a mess of good ripe blueberries. So pitch in while the supply lasts."

The berries were thicker and larger than any they had ever seen before; and Lil Artha declared he considered the judgment of the little black bear "prime."

"He sure knew a good thing when he found it, and so do we," he told those who were working fingers and jaws near him.

When Elmer concluded that "enough was as good as a feast," they once more embarked, and the voyage was resumed. There was a new pusher in the older skiff, however.

"Here, you Landy, suppose you change seats with me," Lil Artha had remarked as the fat scout started to settle down in the middle of the boat, just as though he had a mortgage on that prize seat.

Landy looked worried.

"What for, Lil Artha?" he ventured to say, looking at the skipper with distress plainly marked on his round features; "do you want me to push the boat now? Not but that I'm willing to do anything I'm asked, you know; but I didn't think you'd want to take chances on getting wet, and mebbe losing our packs in the bargain; be-

cause I know I'm awful clumsy about some things."

"Well, in this case we'll have to take the risk," said the other, grimly; "the only satisfaction we have is that if anybody does get wet you won't escape. We're all in the same boat, you understand; and we sink or swim together. Now climb up here, and I'll show you how to handle a pusher. Time you learned a few more of the tricks a true scout ought to know."

Landy, apparently, wanted to do his best. He watched how Lil Artha used the heavy pole and then started to imitate him.

"That's the way, Landy," said Mark, desirous of encouraging the stout boy in his new duties; "you can do it all right if you only keep on the watch."

"Course I can," replied the new hand, scornfully; "guess you're all fooled if you think I never pushed a skiff with a pole before."

"So you were just playing 'possum, were you?" demanded the indignant Lil Artha, "bent on fooling me so as to evade hard work, eh? I'd be serving you right, Landy, if I kept you shovin' away the rest of the afternoon. It'd thin you down a trifle, too, because I think you're getting too fat for any use. Go slow there, and don't splash so loud when you drop the pole end in again."

Landy seemed to soon become fairly proficient so that his mentor could turn his attention to other things of interest they happened to see around them as they continued their course.

Crows scolded from the treetops as the two boats glided underneath. This circumstance might probably pass unnoticed by one who knew little or nothing of woodcraft, but to an Indian it would be a sure sign that the sharp-eyed birds had discovered some human being, probably an enemy, and in that way he would be put on his guard against a surprise.

As the man they were looking for did not appear to be educated along these lines, they need not fear that their presence in the swamp would be betrayed through any such agency as crows cawing, or flying about in excitement.

Some time later Toby uttered a low "whew" that caused Chatz, just then in the act of putting the pole back into the water, to hold it suspended in midair.

"Elmer, I may be mistaken," said Toby, "but something moved over in the branches of that tree yonder, and unless my eyes deceived me, which they seldom do, it was a cat!"

"You mean a wildcat, don't you, Toby?" whispered Landy, for the two boats were close enough together for the occupants to have shaken hands, had they wanted to.

"Just what I meant," repeated Toby, firmly. "I can't say that I see him now, for he's somewhere up in the thickest part of the bushy tree; but it must have been something more than a 'coon, because I actually saw the blaze of its eyes!"

"Whew!" gasped Landy, looking as though he

wanted to drop the push-pole on the spur of the moment; "get your gun, Lil Artha, why don't you? Mean to let a feller be jumped on, and clawed something awful, do you? I give you my word that if I see a wildcat comin' for *me,* I'll jump overboard, and let him tackle the rest of you in the boat, that's what. Get your gun, Lil Artha; they're vicious you must know, specially when they've got kits around."

"We haven't lost any cat!" remarked Lil Artha, composedly, as though he really took a cruel satisfaction in seeing Landy shiver; "and, besides, I don't more'n half believe the fairy story. Toby's got to show me before I own up. I reckon some of my people must have come from Missouri."

"Yes, they raise a heap of mules there, I understand," remarked Toby, with considerable sarcasm; "but I'm glad to see that Elmer has thought it worth while to lay hold of his scatter-gun, so as to be ready. Course we don't want any trouble with any old cat; but there's such a thing as armed peace. If she jumps for us, I hope Elmer will give her a load before she lands, that's all. We've got to pass pretty much under some part of that tree, understand?"

Acting on Elmer's initiative, Lil Artha now also picked up his gun, and started to keep a sharp watch. As Toby had truly said, they could not really continue on their way without passing under the wide-stretching branches of the tree where he claimed to have seen "something that looked like a wildcat."

"Get busy there, Landy, use your pole, and push us along. Don't stand there just like you were frozen stiff; we won't let any cat grab you, make up your mind to it. Get a move on you, I say. Landy Smith."

"Oh! well, might as well be killed for a sheep as a lamb, I reckon," muttered the fat scout as he started to make use of his push-pole.

For the time being, caution was thrown to the winds; all Landy considered was the rapidity with which he could get past that ominous tree containing Toby's bobcat.

Perhaps Landy's heart was beating a regular tattoo as he found himself actually compelled to pass under the tree itself, owing to the narrowness of the channel at just that part of the runway. Elmer, watching out of the tail of his eye, could see how pale the other had become, and he was secretly amused.

It was just like Lil Artha, when their skiff was directly under the suspected tree, to utter a low gasp, and proceed to elevate his gun in a hurry, as though sighting the quarry.

Poor Landy came very near having a fit; he dropped the pole overboard and fell backwards in the boat, which came near swamping. Toby, in the other craft, succeeded in rescuing the floating pole before it had gone completely beyond reach.

"Guess I was mistaken that time!" said Lil Artha, without cracking a smile, although no doubt he must have been secretly chuckling at the

way the handler of the push-pole had shown alacrity in getting out of range.

So Landy, with a sheepish grin, managed to get on his feet again, and take the rescued pole from Toby's hands. He gave the tall scout a sharp look as though suspecting that it had been a trick intended to play upon his nerves. But then Landy was always a good-natured fellow, and never bore anyone ill-will, no matter what the joke might be of which he became the victim.

Toby could not be persuaded that he had not glimpsed a wildcat in that tree under which they passed. He kept staring back as long as it was possible to catch a view of its leafy branches.

"Well, say what you like," he concluded, "I did see *something* whisk out of sight up there; yes, and it had starey eyes in the bargain. If it was a 'coon, then all I can say is they breed queer 'coons up in this old Sassafras Swamp country. There now, that's about enough from me."

"The afternoon is nearly half gone, and we haven't scared up our quarry yet," advised Mark later on.

"Plenty of time, for there's another day coming," said Elmer. "We're here to comb the swamp through from end to end but what we'll find nobody knows. Keep listening, too. It might be possible we'd hear a shout that would give us a clue."

"Say now, I hadn't thought of that before," admitted Toby. "If Hen *is* being treated harsh-like by that unknown who's got hold of him, mebbe he

might let out a yawp once in a while. There's no harm done in listening, I reckon, and Landy here could tell if it was him giving tongue."

Now and then some sound did come to their ears, but of an entirely different character from the one they were hoping to catch. A granddaddy bullfrog on some mossy log sent out loud and deep-toned demands for "more rum! more rum!" Then a saucy bluejay started in to scold the fellows in the boats for daring to trespass in its preserves, and how the angry bird did lay it on until they were well beyond reach of its chatter.

Once a far-away grumble floated faintly to their ears, at which there was an immediate comparing of opinions. Some seemed to incline to the belief that it must be distant thunder, and that they were bound to soon be caught in a storm, which had been creeping unnoticed up on them, the dense foliage by which they were surrounded preventing them from learning the fact sooner.

"If you asked me what it was," said Elmer, when he found that the others were not able to agree, "I'd be inclined to say we're not more than half a mile away from one side of the swamp, and that there's a farm lying yonder on which they keep a bull. I imagine it was his lowing we heard just then."

"Bully, say I, not meaning to be funny either," remarked Landy; "for I'd a heap sooner believe it was a bovine trying out his bazoo than a thunder-storm heading this way. It's bad enough to be in constant danger of getting ducked by falling

overboard, without taking chances overhead in the bargain."

As they did not hear any repetition of the suspicious sound the scouts finally determined that Elmer had guessed right, and that there must be a stock farm not a great distance away from the border of the swamp.

The more they pushed on into what seemed the interminable recesses that surrounded them the greater became their wonder as to how they were to find those they sought. The chances seemed very much against them; but then they had an abounding faith in Elmer's sagacity; and he seemed to be determined on persevering. Doubtless, too, the others reasoned to themselves, Elmer had some clever plan laid out which would be sprung when the proper time arrived; and this confidence did much to relieve their minds as they pressed steadily on.

Lil Artha was apparently bent on making Landy pay for his previous easy time; he kept the other at work, though frequently the fat scout had to hold his push-pole under his arm while he mopped his reeking brow. Perhaps Landy panted very loud on purpose, with the object of causing his obdurate boss to relent, and give him a chance to "spell" with Mark.

Heedless of sighs and half-heard groans alike, Lil Artha just sat there and took his ease, while the slave worked and worked as though he were chained to the galley's oar.

No one ever knew whether it were actually an

accident or a deep-laid scheme on the part of the weary Landy to end this period of torture. There may be some things even worse than a mere ducking—at least a stout boy like Landy Smith might think so.

At any rate, none of the scouts happened to be looking very closely at the time, and consequently they could not say one way or the other. All they knew was that without any warning Landy was seen to be dragged out of the stern of the skiff, struggle to clasp his writhing legs about the push-pole that stood at an oblique angle, caught firmly in the tenacious mud, and then releasing his hold, flop with a great splash into the dark-colored water of Sassafras Swamp!

CHAPTER X

THE SUSPICIOUS ACTIONS OF LANDY

To this very day, it has never been positively known among the scouts of the Wolf Patrol whether Landy met with an unexpected accident, or allowed himself to be deliberately dragged out of the boat, seized with a sudden overwhelming desire to end his spell of drudgery.

The splash was simply terrific, and Landy vanished completely beneath the surface of the swamp water, which chanced to be fairly deep at that place, as of necessity Landy himself must have known.

"Oh! he's overboard!" exclaimed Toby, in the other boat, perhaps louder than his orders from the scout master permitted.

"What a nuisance!" grunted Lil Artha, trying to appear unconcerned, though it might have been noticed that he tried the best he could to stop the movement of the skiff by thrusting both hands in the water, and paddling.

Mark did better than that, for he snatched up a thwart that he knew was loose, and started to use it vigorously so as to check the progress of the floating boat.

Meanwhile, of course, Landy came to the surface like a bobbing cork that had been pulled down by the bite of a fish. He was floundering around like a whale, spouting volumes of water that he must have swallowed in his dive, and apparently doing his level best to stay on top.

"Hey! ain't you goin' to help a feller?" they managed to make out from his almost incoherent splutter.

The other boat had by now pushed up close alongside, and Elmer, leaning over the side, seized the swimmer by the coat collar. Landy at once allowed himself to apparently collapse. He was content to have someone support him; but some of his chums imagined there was a suspicious *manufactured* look in the expression of terror that had fixed itself on his face.

With plenty to lend a helping hand the fat scout was soon pushed and hauled on board the skiff from which he had fallen. The treacherous pole was also recovered and given in charge of Lil Artha, for, of course, it could not be expected that a fellow who had just been rescued from a watery grave would be able to continue that arduous task of pushing.

Lil Artha frequently looked queerly at the dripping Landy as he used the pole. Sometimes he would chuckle softly to himself, and a swift grin flash athwart his lean countenance as though a humorous thought had struck him; after which the tall scout might be observed to shake his head as if bothered.

Landy settled down to taking things easy. He wanted them all to know that he had had a remarkably close call, and every little while he would heave a great sigh, to follow it with such words as:

"I'm terrible glad you boys were on deck to save me. My clothes seemed as heavy as lead, and I sure think I'd have gone down three times if you hadn't chucked me aboard here. That was a narrow squeak for me. I guess I went and got too confident, and it made me careless. But holy smoke! how that mud can grip! I just couldn't get the old pole out nohow, and that's a fact. I won't forget what you did for me, fellers, sure I won't. I hope to be able to do the same for every lasting one of you some day."

"You're too kind, Landy," laughed Toby; "none of us are hankering after an experience like that. I'll never forget what you looked like, dangling there on that push-pole, and trying to squirm your legs around it so as to climb up. Want to know what you made me think of, Landy?"

"Go on and tell me," said the other, with a tremble in his voice, for he was by this time beginning to feel the effect of his immersion.

"Why, you remember how we used to go frog-hunting in a boat, with a three-foot line at the end of a stout pole, and a small hook baited with a piece of red flannel? Well, when we'd see a whopping big greenback we'd dangle that red stuff close to his nose. It was funny to see him squat down like a cat does on sighting a sparrow or a robin, and then jump up to grab the flannel."

Toby paused to chuckle afresh, and the object of his attack urged him to continue, although he evidently realized that he was about to be held up to boyish ridicule.

"First, the frog thinks he wants that queer red bug the worst kind," Toby went on to say, "but as soon as he feels the hook he changes his mind. Then he starts in to do the greatest acrobatic feats you ever saw, twisting his hind legs up over his head like he wanted to turn a somersault, or else climb up the line. Well, when I saw you dangling on that push-pole, I thought of a fat, greenback frog."

"Huh! guess you'd a tried to climb, too, if you'd been in my place," grunted the stout scout, drawing his coat a little closer around him, and shivering.

"No, I'd have stuck by the boat, Landy," said Toby, soberly.

Landy shot him a suspicious glance but did not make a reply. Perhaps he may have been wondering whether any of his mates already suspected that his recent narrow escape had not been such an accident as it appeared.

Elmer now took a hand in the discussion.

"Here, let's make less noise, fellows," he remarked. "In the excitement we've already broken our rule, and if there was anyone near by they must have known all about us. And we're going ashore just beyond there."

"So soon in the afternoon, Elmer; what's up?" demanded Chatz, who, having rested since last

using the pole, did not understand why they should call it a day's work at not much after three o'clock.

"If you look at Landy, you'll understand why," continued the patrol leader.

"Why, he is shivering, sure enough!" exclaimed Chatz; "what ails you, suh? Are you feeling cold on such a warm day as this?"

"What, me cold!" stuttered Landy, trying to put on a brave face, though his lips were turning blue and quivering; "of course I ain't. It must be the excitement of the little scare has gripped me, that's all."

But wise Elmer knew very well he was assuming a degree of comfort which he did not feel, and he could not stand for it.

"You've got to do one of two things, Landy," he said, with authority, "either take the push-pole again, and warm your blood up, or else go ashore to dry your clothes. Otherwise, we'll have you getting a chill, and then the fat will be in the fire as far as our hunt goes. Which shall it be?"

"If it's all the same to you, Elmer, and you mean the whole kit to stop off too, I say let's go ashore," hastily replied Landy.

"Head for that little cove, Lil Artha, and you too, Toby," said Elmer.

"I'd like to lend him something I've got in my pack," remarked Lil Artha, apparently taking pity on the shivering one; "only you c'n see with one eye it wouldn't come within a mile of meeting around *his* waist."

"I've got a sweater he could put on while his clothes are drying," volunteered Toby Jones; "of course, it isn't his size by a jugfull, but then you know sweaters stretch. Like as not it'll go around me twice though, after Landy's worn the same. But he's our chum, and scouts should always be ready to make sacrifices for each other."

"That's real good of you, Toby," mumbled Landy, strangely enough unable to meet the honest gaze of the generous donor.

The landing was soon made, and when the dripping Landy got ashore the first thing Elmer made him do was to jump around, and thresh his arms back and forth. This, of course, was to induce a circulation of blood, so as to resist the chill following his late immersion.

"Lil Artha, I leave it to you to make the fire," said the patrol leader. "Use dry wood so there'll be little or no smoke; and build it in that low spot over to the right. If we choose to keep it going to-night, there's only a small chance that anyone will discover the light in that dip."

Nothing pleased Lil Artha better than to make a camp fire. Besides the genial glow, which he so dearly loved, being a fire worshipper by nature, it doubtless meant that before a great while they would be cooking supper; and as we happen to be aware such a task was never onerous to the lanky scout, whose appetite seldom failed him.

There were others to help pick up the right kind of wood, for every scout has to learn such things early in his career in woodcraft. Soon a

crackling little blaze sprang up, which, being carefully fed, presently amounted to a considerable fire.

"Here you are, Landy," said Elmer, when he could feel the genial heat at a distance of five feet away; "strip off, and hang your duds on these sticks we've planted around the fire. They'll soon begin to steam, and then dry out."

Elmer even took a hand himself, wringing each article cast off by the bulky Landy before he hung it judiciously before the fire.

Fortunately, the fat scout had made out to carry an extra pair of socks and a suit of clean underwear in his pack, and having donned these, with the help of Toby's expansive sweater, he had to make out. There was considerable fun poked at him as he squatted there by the fire attending to his clothes, so as to make sure they did not get scorched by the heat.

"There's one thing bad about this drying-out process, though," Lil Artha was heard saying to Ted, who chanced to be near by; "and that's the way clothes shrink after they've been wet."

"Which reminds me," Toby called out, "of that story about the fat bachelor who had washed a suit of his new underwear himself, and hung it on the clothes-line to dry; but the maid came along afterwards and finding them ready to take in hung up a suit belonging to the kid, about four years of age. When the stout bach stepped out to get his suit and saw that baby outfit hanging in its place, he rubbed his eyes and was heard to say to him-

self: 'Great Scott! and the clerk swore they wouldn't shrink a bit!"

"But I hope *my* clothes won't shrivel up so I can't get in the same," Landy observed, anxiously. "A nice figure I'd cut going around day and night like this. And let me tell you the skeeters would fairly eat me alive. As it is, I'm cracking at them all the time right now."

Frequent examinations, however reassured him. His clothes were drying nicely, and did not seem to be losing any of their former generous proportions. So in time Landy might hope to be garbed in his proper attire as became a scout, and not an Arab or a "side show freak," such as Toby persisted in dubbing him.

Supper was later on taken in hand. There was no lack of recruits when it came to doing the cooking; in fact, Elmer found that he had six enthusiastic would-be *chefs* to choose from, even Landy expressing a willingness to serve, as he had to hover near the blaze more or less anyway, and might as well be busy.

Afterwards the fire was allowed to go down, though Elmer did not feel that it was positively necessary for them to let it die out entirely. If it was bound to betray them doubtless the mischief had already been done; and having to shoulder the blame, they might as well have the game.

It was a great delight to them all to squat there around the fire and talk in low tones. There were no boisterous language or actions tolerated. Elmer gave them to understand that they were

now out on serious business, and all such conduct must be left to another time.

Still, they found plenty to talk about, most of it connected with the strange happening at Hickory Ridge, in which their unfortunate comrade, Hen Condit, bore such a prominent part.

"I wonder now," Toby was saying at one time, "whether the Chief of Police got a clue like we did that'd fetch him up in this region of the country with a posse, meaning to try to round up this escaped rascal?"

There was a variety of opinions concerning this point, some believing one way and the rest having contrary views.

"It would be too bad, now," said Ted, "if they managed to haul both of them up before we could get Hen in hand, and hear hith thory of what happened."

"That's a fact," added Lil Artha. "We know the Chief, and that he'd take Hen back to town just like he was a real criminal. No matter what excuse the boy'd try to give, the Chief wouldn't listen, leaving all that for the Justice of the Peace before whom he'd take his prisoners. Boys, we've just got to find Hen first; that's all there is to it."

That seemed to be the consensus of opinion among them. By degrees they had come to believe that Hen Condit must be under a spell, to have acted as he did. Nothing else would explain the mystery, for Hen had always been reckoned a mild, inoffensive sort of fellow, one of the last

boys in Hickory Ridge to do anything so terrible as commit a robbery.

"That's just what it is!" declared Toby, as they again talked it all over in hopes of getting a better conception of the truth, "the man who's got Hen must be one of those terrible hypnotists you read about. I saw one down in the city last summer at a show, and he made fellows do the most ridiculous things anybody ever heard tell of."

"Such as what?" asked Lil Artha, looking as though he might be skeptical.

"Why, one boy thought he was a goat, and ran all around on his hands and feet, hunting for tin cans and old shoes to eat. Another believed he was a dog baying at the full moon, and I nearly took a fit listening to him whoop. Then there was a third fellow who believed he was made of iron, so he stretched himself from one chair to another, and three men stood right in his middle; and he didn't break, either. Say, it was the greatest sight you ever saw."

"Fakes, all rank fakes!" snorted Lil Artha; "every one of those boys was a confederate of the imposter. You notice they never come to small places where everybody knows everybody else, but show in cities, where a new audience comes each night. I'd like to see a circus like that, just to laugh; but you couldn't get me to believe in hypnotism worth a cent."

"Well, then," demanded Toby, "what do you think this man's got on Hen that he's made him do whatever he wanted, tell us that, if you can?"

"I don't know," replied Lil Artha, promptly.

"See?" cried Toby, exultantly, "he backs down right away."

"There are a lot of things I don't know," added the tall scout; "but it's my opinion that Hen's being held to that man through some kind of fear. P'raps he's been made to believe he did something *terrible,* and his only hope is to skip out before the police get him. But let's wait till we find him, and then we'll know it all."

"A sensible conclusion," remarked Elmer, who had listened to all the talk with considerable interest; "and as the hour is getting late suppose we begin to settle how we're going to sleep through our first night in Sassafras Swamp."

CHAPTER XI

A NIGHT ALARM

Up to then none of them had apparently bothered about figuring how they would make themselves comfortable, so that Elmer's suggestion was like a bomb thrown into the camp.

"I should think we had better get busy if we want to have a place to sleep on," Landy exclaimed, for the hard ground did not appeal very much to the fat scout, accustomed as he was to a feather bed at home.

"We have no blankets, remember," said Elmer, "and that is one reason why I laid out to keep the fire burning in a small way through the night."

"But luckily," added Mark, who apparently had been looking around more or less since they came ashore, "there are plenty of spruce and hemlock and fir trees close by. We can make our beds like hunters always used to do, away back in Daniel Boone's time."

"Every fellow will have to shift for himself, then," said Elmer; "so let's start in and lay a foundation for a soft and fragrant bed."

"Hay was good enough for me last night, suh!" declared the Southern boy; "but I've got a hunch I can sleep just as sound on balsam."

"Hemlock for mine every time!" announced Lil Artha.

Then there was a bustling time as the entire seven scouts started to break off small branches and twigs from the adjacent trees, laying them in piles until it looked as though they had secured enough for their purpose.

The beds were arranged in something like a circle around the fire, and acting on the advice of Elmer, who had been on the cattle range and knew what was right, each sleeper expected to keep his feet toward the fire.

"Looks a heap like a big cart-wheel," observed Lil Artha.

"The fire is the hub, and each scout a spoke, that's right, suh," Chatz agreed.

Landy acted as though he would never get enough of the fragrant browse. Long after the others had stopped gathering it, he continued. When they joked him about being greedy when there was no price to pay, he had an answer ready.

"I'm a whole lot heavier than anybody else, don't you know?" he told them. "And on that account I ought to have a higher pile under me. Besides, I always did like to gather things in."

"We'll remember that, Landy," threatened Lil Artha, "the next time we need a big supply of firewood. You've fixed it up good and tight, and you'll find us the most obliging lot of scouts east of the Rockies."

After considerable fussing and joshing, they managed finally to get "fixed." As none of them

had slept too soundly on the preceding night, owing to their strange environment, and the wild alarm that sounded when Johnny's chicken-thief trap was sprung, the boys were both weary and drowsy.

Elmer was really the last to drop off, and he smiled as he raised his head to glance around at the stretched-out figures of his six chums. Some were breathing pretty loud, but Elmer could forgive that, and so he also gave himself up to indulging in refreshing slumber.

He was awakened by a horrible crash that made him instantly sit up. Other figures were bobbing up all around the smouldering camp fire. From the condition of this latter, Elmer knew that he must have been asleep much more than an hour.

"What happened?" gasped Landy the first thing, for he was digging his fat knuckles into his heavy eyes as though trying to rout the last atom of drowsiness from them.

"It was me," replied Lil Artha, promptly; "I fired my gun!"

"What at?" demanded Elmer, thrilled in spite of himself.

"A creeping man!" came the astounding answer.

"Wow! what's all that, Lil Artha?" Toby exclaimed; "you must have been dreaming, and did it in your sleep. It's a good thing none of us happened to be in range of your old Marlin scattergun, that's all."

"Rats! I tell you I was wide awake, and sitting up when I fired," insisted the tall scout.

Of course, by this time all were on their feet, for the excitement had gripped hold of them. Elmer realized that Lil Artha was speaking earnestly, and showing no symptoms of having played a practical joke.

"Now tell us all about it, Lil Artha," he commanded.

"Why, it was about thisaway," said the other, obediently. "I happened to wake up and felt a bit thirsty, so I sat up thinking I'd crawl over to our big jug of fresh water and take a swig. But just as I sat up I saw something moving over in the bushes about twenty-five feet away. Yes, sir, and the fire picked up just then so I could make out what looked mighty like a man peeking at me through the same bushes—fact is, I *know* that's what it was, and nothing else."

"Well, what did you do then?" asked the patrol leader.

"I always keep my faithful Marlin handy when I sleep out in the woods, you remember, Elmer," continued the other, with a touch of boyish pride in his voice; "so all I had to do was to grab up the gun and blaze away as quick as I could throw the same to my shoulder."

Elmer caught his arm in a fast grip.

"Not aiming at a man in the bushes only twenty-five feet away, Lil Artha—don't tell me you were silly enough to do that?" he asked, somewhat hoarsely.

The tall scout chuckled, and Elmer's fears were instantly dissipated.

"I'm not a fool, Elmer," he said, loftily. "I aimed away up in the air, and shot to scare not to hurt!"

"Good enough, Lil Artha," the scout master went on to say in a relieved tone; "I couldn't believe you'd be so reckless. A charge of bird shot at that distance goes like a bullet, because it hasn't a chance to scatter."

It was apparently Toby's turn to appear skeptical now.

"Huh! I s'pose he lit out then like a streak, after you'd wasted a good charge of shot in the air, and knocked leaves from the branches of trees —is that what you want us to believe, Lil Artha?"

"Didn't you hear the row he made rushing away?" demanded the other, severely; "but then all of you started talking at once, and I guess you didn't take much notice."

"I heard some sort of noise off that way," asserted Elmer, pointing.

"Correct, Elmer, for that's where he was kneeling, right over there in those thick bushes. You see I mightn't have noticed him at all only he happened to move just when a little flame shot up along that piece of partly burned wood."

"Oh! I admit that you may have seen *something,*" persisted Toby; "but the chances are ten to one it was a white-faced heifer that had hit on our camp, and was looking to see who and what we were. We happen to know there's a stock farm

not a great ways off, and I reckon their cows get into the swamp once in so often."

"Think you've laid it down pretty pat, don't you?" sneered Lil Artha; "but I'm going to show you where you're away off your base. Guess I've got eyes, and know a human from a white-faced heifer. Watch my smoke, that's all."

With that the indignant scout handed his gun to Chatz, and stepping over to the fire picked up the half-burned brand which he had mentioned before. This Lil Artha whirled briskly around his head several times until he had it crackling and taking fire afresh, so that it promised to make a very fair torch, if used for only a brief time.

Elmer made no objections to the programme. Indeed, he was deeply interested in the outcome, whatever it might prove to be.

After having made sure of sufficient light, Lil Artha boldly strode directly toward the spot he had indicated as the scene of the near-tragedy.

"Go slow, Lil Artha," warned cautious Landy; "he might be laying for you there. Keep him covered, Chatz, with the gun, won't you?"

"Oh! give us a rest, Landy; didn't I tell you he hoofed it like fun after that shot gave him a scare? Who's afraid?"

With that Lil Artha reached the bushes indicated, and the others were close on his heels, every fellow eager to find out whether what he had told them was in fact true, or if the apparition had only been a figment of Lil Artha's imagination, the tail-end, as it were, of a stirring dream.

Bending down, the long-legged scout began to scan the ground. His discoveries started almost immediately, as his excited words announced:

"Here's where he pushed back the brush, as you c'n see for yourselves. Yes, and there's aplenty of footprints besides. Looky where he knelt down, because here's the mark of his knees as plain as anything. Now what do you say, Toby Jones? Is the laugh on me, after all?"

Toby had to confess that it did not look that way.

"Oh! I'm ready to own up you did see a man snooping around our camp, Lil Artha," he confessed, frankly; "and when you let fly with that load he lit out like all possessed. Elmer, of course the chances are it was *that man,* don't you think?"

"We know of no other in this region," said the patrol leader. "He must have discovered our fire, and was creeping up when our vigilant comrade saw him, meaning to steal part of our food supply. We happen to know they're short of grub, and now that the country is being roused against them this man is beginning to be more or less afraid to venture out of the swamp to secure another lot of fowls, or anything else along the eating line."

"But it looks as if he came here alone, Elmer, seeing we can find only one set of footprints," remarked Lil Artha.

"Oh! mercy! I certainly hope now he hasn't done anything *ter*rible to our chum, Hen Condit," quavered Landy, in a panic.

"There's no reason why we should believe such a thing," announced Elmer, decidedly; "we've already agreed that he possesses some sort of strange power over poor Hen, and I suppose the boy is waiting in their camp away from here, for the man to come back with provisions."

They walked back and the fire was revived, for since no one felt just like trying to sleep again they concluded to sit up a while and talk it all over. This attempted visit on the part of the unknown man had apparently put a new face on the whole matter. It might change their plans considerably, too, some of the scouts feared.

"I don't see why that should be," Elmer explained. "Of course, after this we'll have to keep a watch every night, so as to hold him up if he tries to get away with any of our stuff. It may hurry things along in the end. If they have little to eat, and the man is really afraid to go outside of the swamp thinking the police are waiting to arrest him, he may make up his mind to surrender to us."

"Then you believe he knows why we're here, do you, Elmer?" demanded Toby.

"It seems possible, although, of course, we have to jump at conclusions, because we really don't know," came the answer.

"Whew! but this is all a dark mystery," confessed Landy; "and I never was much account at guessing the answer to riddles. Who is this man; what is he holding over Hen Condit's head; why should our chum do that awful thing, and then

leave such a silly letter behind to convict himself? I'm all in a whirl, and if anybody can straighten me out I'd be a heap obliged."

Apparently, nobody could, at least there was no effort made in that direction. In fact, to tell the truth, all the boys felt that they were groping in the gloom, and even their best guesses had only a slender foundation.

"We've enlisted in the war, though," said Lil Artha, grimly, "and we won't be kept back by any little thing. If that chap comes snooping around any more he stands a mighty good chance of getting hurt, that's all I'm going to say about it."

"And we'll run across Hen, sooner or later, you can put that in your pipe and smoke it," asserted Toby Jones, firmly.

When they had discussed the subject from every side, without picking up much additional information worth while, the boys began to feel sleepy again. So Elmer told them off in watches, two scouts being assigned to duty at a time. Landy was left out, because he was the odd fellow, and perhaps for other obvious reasons.

He pretended to be quite indignant over the slight, and vowed that he would certainly sit up through one of the watches with the pair whose turn it happened to be. But none of them took his threats seriously, because they knew full well when Landy Smith once got asleep it required something like a young earthquake to arouse him.

Elmer hardly anticipated another visit from the mysterious unknown that night. He fancied the

fellow must have imagined Lil Artha really shot point-blank at him, and that it was only his good luck which enabled him to escape disaster.

Being too good a scout to take unnecessary chances, and not wishing to lose the main part of such supplies as they had fetched along for several days' use, the patrol leader took all due precautions.

The fire was kept up the balance of the night in the bargain, for they felt as though the illumination helped to guard them. Complete darkness might have tempted a raiding thief to try again, while he would be afraid to attempt such a risky move while the flames crackled and lighted up the immediate surroundings.

After all, nothing happened to disturb them. The sentries stuck diligently to their duties, and changed at the time appointed. This had been laid out by Elmer, as the sky had cleared and the stars could be plainly seen in places. He figured time from the position of certain bright planets, and their setting would mean the different changes in guard mount. Scouts who have been in camp have learned these methods of telling time by the use of the heavenly watch, and few of them after once mastering the interesting method find a need for Ingersols.

When daylight sifted in through the treetops overhead, the boys gave signs of arousing. Landy, of course, was the last to awaken, and he professed to be quite heart-broken because no one had called him in time to help stand out that watch. The

gleam of humor in his eyes, however, told Elmer that the fat boy was not quite so much disappointed as he made out to be. In fact, the patrol leader was beginning to fear that Landy had latterly shown signs of developing a new trait in his composition, and started to play the part of a deceiver, in return for constant badgering on the part of his fun-loving mates.

It was while they were eating breakfast that Elmer propounded a new scheme, and after placing it before his comrades asked them what their opinions were.

"The question now is," was what he said, seriously, "whether we mean to keep on poling our skiff along the waterways; or shouldering our packs take the shore from now on; and as our rule always has been, majority votes carry the day."

CHAPTER XII

THE VALUE OF SCOUTCRAFT

"But that old skiff suits me all right," objected Landy, who did not particularly fancy shouldering his pack, to tramp through brush and over marshy tracts of land, such as must be their portion.

"Why ought we make a change, Elmer?" asked Ted, also unable to grasp the meaning of this new move.

Not so Lil Artha, who was quick to see things, especially when some suggestion on the part of the scout-master was concerned.

"Why, what ails you fellows?" he exclaimed, scornfully, as became one possessed of superior brains; "don't you understand my sighting that man last night alters the whole business? Now, there's no need of hunting a needle in a haystack, for we've got a real trail to follow up."

"That's right, suh, and scouts ought to be able to accomplish the task," Chatz remarked in his superior way, which, however, everybody knew was only skin-deep, the result of his Southern birth and training, for he was a splendid fellow at heart, and well liked.

"What about the skiffs then, if we abandon the same?" asked Toby.

"Oh! we'll mark the place, and Johnny can easily find his property when we're paying him five dollars for their use," said Lil Artha, lightly. "And boys, better make a start with those packs right now."

Landy sighed heavily, and seeing there was no escape he started to carry out the suggestion of the tall scout. His lack of ambition was so noticeable that Lil Artha could not resist the temptation to take a shot at him.

"I was just thinking, fellows," he went on, maliciously, "that Landy's going to play out on us, and give no end of trouble; so we might leave him here to watch the boats while we're gone."

"What! me stay here, and starve to death?" ejaculated Landy, commencing to put considerably more vigor into his labor; "I guess not, if I know myself, and I think I do."

"Oh! for that matter we'd let you have *some* grub," continued the generous Lil Artha; "enough for one full meal anyway."

"No thank you, not any in mine. I'm going where the rest do, make up your mind to that. If the old boats have to be watched stay yourself, Lil Artha, that's all. You couldn't coax or hire me to remain alone a single night in this awful swamp, not if you tried till doomsday. I like company, and if I have to I c'n even put up with you as a steady, Lil Artha. Now that'll do for you. It isn't to be considered for a second."

Of course, Lil Artha was only having a little fun, because there was no thought of leaving anybody behind to stand guard over the two abandoned skiffs; and least of all would Elmer have dreamed of appointing the fat and timid scout for such a duty.

When deciding on such a radical change in their plans, Elmer did not forget that it might also be well for them to conceal the two boats. Should the man they were hunting chance to come upon the skiffs he might think it good policy to smash in the planks to such an extent that they would be useless for further voyaging; and possibly the scouts would be glad to get out of the swamp by the same means they had taken when entering.

"First of all, let's hide the boats somewhere," he suggested. "They're pretty heavy, of course, but seven of us ought to be able to carry them, one at a time."

"It needn't be for far either," Lil Artha assured them, "because here's a jimdandy place close by. Everybody on the job, and see what you can lift."

After all it was nothing to speak of, for the two skiffs were easily handled, and nicely concealed from view. When the boys had removed all traces of their passage, anyone might walk by within five feet of the patch of bushes and never suspect what lay there so neatly hidden.

"There, that job's done," said Elmer; "now finish packing, and we'll be off."

Landy hurried now. He had a lingering fear

that there might be more in that obscure threat made by Lil Artha of desertion on their part than appeared on the surface. The more he considered being left alone in that dreary swamp the faster Landy's fingers flew. He also kept a wary eye on the tall scout, and had Lil Artha shown any intention of hurrying off he would have surely found Landy tagging at his heels, whether he had his pack or not.

Meanwhile, Elmer, having quickly arranged his possessions, because of long familiarity in the packing line, had gone over once more to the bush patch where on the preceding night Lil Artha had seen that suspicious lurker.

Of course, it was Elmer's intention to examine the tracks left by the mysterious visitor, and see whether it would be possible for them to pick up the trail.

He was, of course, taking it for granted that the party must have been the same man they had been hunting ever since reaching the swamp. So far as Elmer could say, his footprints resembled those they had seen with Hen's, although there was really nothing remarkable about them to distinguish the indentations above all others.

Elmer knew that they took certain chances in figuring this way. After all this man may have been the farmer who had a stock farm. Some of his cattle breaking bounds would likely enough wander into the swamp, and in looking for the strays perhaps he had discovered the smouldering fire.

As tramps, and possibly bad men as well, sometimes hid in the depths of swamps, the cautious cattle-raiser may have been crawling up to find out the truth when that sudden shot frightened him, so that he had run wildly away.

Well, no matter which of these two solutions to the mystery proved to be the correct one, Elmer meant to try and come upon the party whose trail now lay before him. He still favored the original idea, and, in fact, never bothered mentioning the other speculation to his comrades.

All of them being ready they set out. Elmer and Lil Artha led the van, for they were recognized as the best equipped scouts in the Wolf Patrol when it came to a question of trailing. What Lil Artha lacked in actual experience, he partly made up for in his pertinacity, as well as his constant practice along these lines.

It soon became evident to them that the fugitive had not thought it worth while to try and hide his trail at the time he fled from the camp. That sudden shot must have given him a nervous shock, so that all he cared about just then was to put as much distance between himself and those seven khaki-clad boys as possible. The fact that they carried weapons and would not hesitate to use their firearms must have convinced him it was a risky thing to hang around that region any longer.

For half an hour the boys moved on. Sometimes it was at a fair walk, and then again when the trail grew fainter so that those at the head

of the column were compelled to exercise all of their knowledge in order to make sure progress, things slackened more or less.

The boys had been warned not to make any unnecessary noise. Talking save in the lowest of whispers was strictly tabooed, and even at that Elmer did not encourage any conversation. They also had to take care of their feet, and not press their weight upon some stick that would break with a loud snap. Even such small things have spoiled well-laid plans before now, and trackers, whether of wild beasts of human fugitives, cannot be too careful.

If Landy puffed a little the other made no objection, since he took care to do it half under his breath. It was not such very easy work, though as scouts most of them enjoyed every minute of the time, being constantly thrilled with the expectation of suddenly coming upon a camp where those they sought might be found, and taken by surprise.

Lil Artha even had it all arranged in his mind just how he meant to threaten that man with his gun, warning him savagely that it would be as much as his skin was worth to attempt to flee.

It was in this humor that they came to a log that lay across their path. Here the trail ended, but, of course, such clever fellows as Elmer and Lil Artha would understand a little trick like that. The stumbling man had naturally taken to the log, passed well along to the other end, and then jumped off.

"You take that side and I'll cover this one," said Elmer, without the least hesitation; "ten to one we'll get him again."

They did, for Lil Artha quickly found the tracks once more. The incident, however, told them that the man had begun to fear he would be followed when morning came, since this was his first effort to baffle pursuit.

"I'm sorry that happened," said Elmer, softly, to his working partner; "because it's going to make our task all the harder you see."

"Do you mean because he's begun to be afraid he'll be followed?" asked the other.

"That's just it," continued the patrol leader; "if that idea gets a firm hold of him he's bound to do everything he knows how so as to leave us in the lurch. In the end he might even decide to quit the swamp, and take his chances of getting away outside."

"Well, we don't quit at that, do we?" asked Lil Artha, with a gritting of his teeth that told of grim determination.

Elmer looked at him and smiled.

"We'd be a nice lot of scouts, wouldn't we," he said, sarcastically, "if we were ready to throw up the sponge at the first sign of trouble? No, we've started on this trail, and we'll run it down if it keeps us busy the rest of our vacation."

"In the immortal words of General Grant while flanking Lee and driving him back toward Richmond," continued the other, " 'we'll fight it out on this line if it takes all summer!' I'm glad to hear

you say that, Elmer. But here we are up against it again, seems like."

This time the fleeing man had reached a certain point, for his tracks could be plainly seen, but the trail abruptly ended.

"It's an easy guess," said Elmer, after a brief examination. "You can see that he stood up on his toes here, for the indentation is heavier forward. Then, besides, look at this bark lying fresh on the ground, only a few small pieces, but scraped from the tree above us."

"Sure thing, Elmer!" declared Lil Artha, while the others stood and watched the actions of their comrades with the utmost curiosity, "he just grabbed hold of that lowermost limb, gave his feet a fling against the trunk of the tree, and hoisted himself up yonder."

"Then perhaps he's somewhere up there still," suggested Landy.

"I don't think so," continued Elmer; "but we'll send up an expedition to find out after we make sure that all avenues of escape are closed. My own opinion is that he passed out along some other low-hanging limb, and dropped to the ground again, perhaps thirty feet away from here."

"Let's look and see!" cried Toby, eagerly.

"Be careful," warned Lil Artha, hurriedly; "for unless you step mighty fine you may cover up the prints of his shoes where he dropped down."

Elmer had already decided just about where he would have descended from the tree had he been

in the place of the fugitive. Lil Artha, too, seemed to have settled on the same spot for he was just at the heels of the leader.

Instead of looking down, Elmer kept glancing up. It might be he was mentally following the straddling figure along that great limb. Presently he abruptly stopped.

"I can see signs that tell me he came this far, but they end up there," he told his companion. "Yes, and here you see fresh leaves on the ground. Look sharp, Lil Artha, and it may be your eyes will light on the fresh trail."

Hardly had Elmer spoken when a low but eager cry told that success had been achieved. Lil Artha pointed to the mark of feet close beside them. Undoubtedly, the fugitive had dropped once more to the ground.

"Say, let me tell you he's a slick article, that chap," said Toby, after they had once more made a fresh start. "I wouldn't be surprised to learn he'd been out on the plains in his day, he seems to know so much about Indian ways and all that."

"But he's met his match in our scout-master, for a fact," blustered Landy, full of genuine admiration for the commander who had many a time led the Wolf Patrol boys to victory over stupendous obstacles.

"Silence everybody now," came from Elmer, though naturally it must have given him a warm feeling in the region of his heart to know that these good chums felt so kindly toward him and were not backward in expressing their sentiments.

So they continued on for another stretch. The fugitive must have come to believe that by this time he would have thrown any possible tracker off the scent; at any rate, he tried no new game looking to baffling pursuit.

Gliding along like shadows the seven scouts made fair progress. Elmer was of the opinion that at any minute now they might come upon the spot where the unknown had his hide-out. He had communicated his plans to the others before this, and they all knew the parts they would be expected to play should it come to a hold-up.

Covered by the guns that he and Lil Artha carried, it was doubtful whether the man would dare take chances and try to flee. If he did and left Hen behind him, the first thing for them to do would be to secure the boy, even if he evinced a desperate desire to avoid them.

Somehow, Elmer himself believed they would find what they were seeking in the unusually large patch of brush that now lay ahead of them. He caught glimpses of the water just beyond, which proved that an arm of the swamp extended in this direction.

Pushing steadily on as noiselessly as possible, they were presently able to part the bushes and discover a dead fire in plain sight. The boat lay on the shore, with one plank smashed in, doubtless the result of an accident that had wrecked the hopes of the two fugitives.

Eagerly they surveyed the prospect, and then Lil Artha gave a grunt of disgust.

"Skipped out, that's a measly shame!" he exclaimed, wrathfully.

"But what's that white thing stuck in the crotch of the wand yonder?" demanded Toby; "looks to me like it might be some sort of communication from our poor pard Hen Condit; because that's an old scout and Indian way of leaving word, you know."

Elmer was already hurrying forward to possess himself of the message. The others watched him take it from the crotch of the stick and open the soiled paper on which there seemed to be more or less crooked writing in pencil. Then the patrol leader turned to his comrades, a look of satisfaction on his face.

CHAPTER XIII

HEN CONDIT'S STRANGE MESSAGE

"Is it from Hen?" asked two or three at once, that being the all important fact stamped upon their minds.

At the same time they realized just as well as anything it must be so, else Elmer would not be smiling and frowning as he deciphered the meaning of the scrawl. As all the boys knew, Hen Condit was one of the poorest writers in the Hickory Ridge High School. It may be remembered that in speaking of his other note some of them brought this fact forward, stating that a teacher had once declared the boy well named, since his efforts looked like "hen-tracks" on paper.

"It's lucky that I'm able to read any sort of old writing," remarked Elmer, not without a touch of boyish pride; "it's a gift with me, and Hen sometimes came to ask me to tell him what he'd set down, for after it got cold he couldn't well make it out himself."

"Then you've sensed the meaning of his present communication, have you, Elmer?" questioned Mark, a little bit given to stilted language.

"I can read it all right," was the reply he re-

ceived, "but understanding the gist of it is another thing. The sentences seem disconnected, and some of them are queer. When Hen wrote this he must either have been half out of his mind, or else he was in great fear of something, or *somebody!*"

Of course, when the scout-master said this, it produced something of a sensation among the other six fellows. They exchanged grave looks, while Lil Artha was seen to shake his head, and give that gun of his a little tilt upwards, as though he now believed more than ever the time was near at hand when he would be compelled to make some sort of use of the same, in order to save the kidnapped chum.

"Please read it out to us, Elmer!" begged Landy.

"Yeth, we're wondering what it can all be about," added Ted Burgoyne.

"Then listen, and please don't interrupt me until I finish," said Elmer. "This is what Hen's written with a lead pencil on this sheet of paper, which I think he must have torn from a little memorandum book I happen to know he always carries about in his pocket."

He held the crumpled paper closer to his eyes, for in places the writing was rather faint, and in two particular spots Elmer had to guess at a word, for evidently a drop of something, perhaps a salty tear, had fallen on the paper, blurring the work of the lead pencil stub.

"Boys, perhaps you'll get this—he says he counted seven and everyone wore a khaki uniform

—he thinks you must be the militia—course I know better—but it's no use, you just can't help me—I'm a goner, and the most miserable boy on earth —but I say on the honor of a scout I never meant to do it—I've just got to disappear—maybe I'll let you hear from me if ever I get Out West where they can't find me. Oh! what hard luck, but I have to do whatever he says, no matter what I want. I'm meaning to leave this behind in the scout way, and don't I hope you'll find it. There, he's calling to me to hurry, for we're going to quit this hide-out and try to escape. I'm awful hungry, too. Better leave me to my fate unless you can find a way to seal his lips. That's all. Hen."

"Great Cæsar!" exclaimed Lil Artha, who had hung on every word spoken by Elmer. "That proves one of two things. Either our poor pard is looney, or else he's got in the power of a rascal who controls his mind. I always knew Hen was weak in the upper story just a teenty mite. Poor old chap, we've got to find him if it takes us till Christmas. You hear me talking now!"

"Yeth, and we all thay the thame!" burst from Ted, as he doubled his none too expansive fists, and looked as savage as he could.

Indeed, a hasty glance around just then would have told any observer that this strange message, filled with despair and yearning, left by Hen Condit in the crotch of a stick thrust into the ground, had renewed their former resolution not to give over the search until they had either found the

missing chum or exhausted every known device looking to success.

"If you asked me," said Elmer, "I'd say the answer to the riddle lay between the two things you mention, Lil Artha. Hen is crazed almost, but it is with fear. He finds himself in the power of a brute who is using him for his own purposes. How it's been done, of course, we can only guess, but the boy believes he has been forced to rob his guardian, and that a posse is searching right now for him, with the intention of putting him in jail. That explains his panic."

"And say, he tells us right at the end of his note that he's some hungry," Lil Artha went on to remark; "and, according to my notion, that condition is next door to being insane. Why, mebbe the poor fellow hasn't had a solitary bite for a whole day or even two of 'em. I pity him from the bottom of my heart."

"Notice what he incidentally says near the end," added Elmer. "'Better leave me to my fate unless you can find a way to seal his lips.' That seems to strengthen our theory, doesn't it?"

"All this mention of 'he' must stand for the unknown man who has got Hen, of course?" ventured Mark.

"Couldn't be anybody else," the patrol leader made answer; "in fact, Hen just now doesn't seem able to even think of any other person."

"The fellow is no common rascal, let me tell you, suh," Chatz declared. "He must have been some sort of professor along the lines of magic,

perhaps a hypnotist who performed wonders on the stage before crowds, and then dabbled in things that the law sat down on, which landed him in the penitentiary finally."

"When the truth comes out, Chatz, I'm positive that your theory will be found pretty near the exact facts," affirmed Elmer.

"But all the time we're jabbering away here," warned Lil Artha, "remember that they're getting further and further away from us."

"As to that," the patrol leader assured him, "a few minutes don't make so much difference, and it's always best to start right, so as to avoid a loss of ten times as much later on by making mistakes. Then again, I'm pretty sure that man is too smart to think of trying to leave Sassafras Swamp before night comes, even if he plans to do it then."

Somehow, this intelligence comforted the more impetuous ones. They had such unlimited faith in Elmer knowing what course was best to pursue that his judgment was accepted on its face value every time—just as the Treasury notes of the United States Government are relied upon to be worth their face denomination in specie.

"About how long ago would you thay they had thkipped out of here?" Ted asked, as they still lingered, looking to the right and to the left, as though wanting to make certain nothing valuable in the way of a clue could have escaped their scrutiny.

"Lil Artha, we're depending on you for that in-

formation," suggested Elmer, although it could not be doubted that he himself was able to give a pretty good answer, for he had observed certain signs as well as the tall scout.

"Not more than two hours ago, I'd say, Elmer," Lil Artha ventured, with considerable confidence manifested in his manner, as though if put to it he was able to muster all the evidence necessary to establish his veracity.

"Just about what I thought myself," added the scout-master, with a satisfied smile. "Two heads are better than one, any day, Lil Artha, especially when they seem to work together as well as ours do."

"Then the man didn't think to skip out right away after he got back here, did he?" asked Landy, "because a good many hours have elapsed since Lil Artha woke us all up with that sudden shot."

"No, he must have slept for some time," answered Elmer, "knowing there wasn't apt to be any sort of a pursuit in the night. Then again he relied more or less on having blinded his trail, as a man who had spent some time in the West among Indians and cowboys would have done. It wasn't a great while before dawn when he must have aroused poor Hen and told him they must get away."

"But when do you think our chum could have scribbled that message?" asked Mark.

"Evidently, after he knew about our being within a mile of him," replied Elmer, with a

promptness that told how he had figured it all out. "I suppose the man told him about the khaki soldiers who were in the swamp looking for them, thinking it would make Hen more frightened than ever; but we know he guessed the truth about our being his comrades of the Wolf Patrol."

"Then, believing he would be hurried off again, sooner or later," Mark continued, "he took the first chance he had to write that message. He must have fixed it in that split stick, and just as they were leaving here stuck the wand in the ground, scout fashion."

"We seem to have it all sized up to a dot by now," remarked the leader, preparing to move; "and as there isn't anything else for us to do here, suppose we get busy on the trail again, Lil Artha?"

"I'm your chicken, and you can depend on me when it comes to scenting out a trail, Elmer. Wonder if that man will be up to any more high jinks in the way of walking along logs, climbing trees, and such tricks? We'll keep a good lookout for such capers, believe me."

They were soon moving along, the two trackers in the van as before, with others trailing after. Landy brought up the rear, though Mark kept a careful eye on him most of the time, as though rather skeptical about his ability to make progress without getting into some sort of trouble.

It would be just like clumsy Landy to trip, and make a headlong plunge into the brown tamarack water of the swamp just when he should have been

most careful. They had known him to do such things more than a few times in the past; and on this account Mark always made it a point to drop back and keep him company when he imagined the situation became acute.

From the rapid manner in which Lil Artha and Elmer picked up the trail it was plainly evident that so far the unknown fugitive from justice had not bothered resorting to any of his tricks looking to blinding the tracks.

He had been compelled to wait for daylight before trying to move through the swamp, because progress would have been next door to impossible at night time unless one were familiar with the way, or else carried a lantern. Neither of these happened to be within his scope, and so he had to depend upon daylight.

Of course, none of the boys knew what sort of a reception they might expect when finally they overtook the man they were following. What little they could gather from various sources inclined them to believe he must be a pretty desperate sort of customer. The occasional mention of him in that strange message left by Hen was along those very lines.

He might be armed for all they knew. Such criminals usually are, though in this case it might be otherwise, Elmer had told them, since he believed the man had been a prisoner making his escape when first he struck Sassafras Swamp, and concluded to have his hide-out in its depths.

Still Lil Artha was not for taking too many chances. As he moved along, the tall scout managed to keep that reliable gun of his in position for quick use, should an occasion arise calling for service.

He also tried to glance ahead from time to time, in hopes of locating any suspicious ambuscade. A sudden attack that would leave himself and Elmer weaponless might throw the entire party into a state of helplessness, which would always reflect on their ability as scouts.

They spent half an hour in this fashion, though the trail wound in and out so much that at the end of that time they could hardly have been more than a quarter of a mile away from the late camp of the fugitives.

"Did you hear that, Elmer?" whispered Lil Artha, suddenly, throwing out a hand so as to clutch the other's arm; while everyone became rigid with suspense.

"It certainly sounded like a cough," admitted the other.

"But I'm dead certain it wasn't from in front of us, but over to the left, which would be some queer," muttered the tall tracker, staring in the quarter which he now indicated with outstretched finger.

"I thought the same, Lil Artha," Elmer told him; "but then this trail twists and turns so much it might get around that way easy enough."

"Of course it might, Elmer."

"All we can do is to keep going along as we are,

and some of us watch for signs of Hen and the man over yonder," added the scout-master.

"Then you don't think it'd pay to strike out to the left?" questioned the other, who seemed to be hesitating between two opinions.

"We would be silly to quit a sure thing for an uncertainty," said Elmer, decidedly. "After all our ears may have deceived us, and it might have only been some queer grunt of a frog, a heron fishing for minnows, or even a muskrat choking over his dinner. No, we must keep on as we're going, that's sure."

Lil Artha looked relieved. After all, it pleased the tall scout to have someone decide a puzzling question like this for him. Responsibility weighs heavy on the shoulders of many even capable boys, and they are only too glad to be able to shift it on occasion.

"Just as you say, Elmer, and I reckon you're quite right, too," always in a low, sibilant tone that would not carry further than a dozen yards at the most.

They again turned to take up the trail, which just at that point happened to run through some bushes coming up to their hips. It was easy to see where those ahead of them had brushed through, for they had trampled down the lush grass, and brushed aside the tender branches of the bushes.

Elmer had even bent over to take a good look down at the ground before setting forth when he heard Toby Jones give a sudden, violent hiss.

Now, that was a well-known sign among the boys

of the Wolf Patrol, and which had served them in good stead many a time in the past. Heard under such thrilling conditions, it could mean only one thing; Toby had discovered some sort of danger, and was warning his comrades in order that they might drop down out of sight.

Every fellow seemed to understand this instantly, for as though they were all moved by the same controlling influence, they allowed themselves to sink on their knees amidst the friendly bushes that afforded such splendid shelter. Even as Elmer dropped thus he had shot a quick glance toward the left, from which that seeming cough had come, and saw something that electrified him.

CHAPTER XIV

BOUND TO SUCCEED

No wonder the young scout-master was surprised and thrilled by what he saw as he crouched there amidst the bushes, and stared over their tops.

Not more than sixty or seventy yards away at the most there appeared to be a violent commotion among another bunch of brush, as though a number of unseen parties might be forcing their way through the obstruction.

Even as Elmer, and his chums as well, looked, a figure burst out, quickly followed by a second, a third, and then still more, until in all there were six in the queer procession that seemed to be heading directly for the late hide-out of the swamp fugitives.

What startled the boys most of all was the fact that they knew several of those who went to make up that strange company. First, there was Johnny Spreen, the bound boy at the Trotter farm, and who had given them so many points concerning the swamp he knew so well.

Just behind Johnny walked a consequential looking personage dressed in a blue uniform, and

with a glittering shield fastened on his left breast. Well did the Hickory Ridge boys know the Chief of Police in their own town. Behind him came a second and a third man, also in uniform, whom they knew to be local "cops;" while the next had the appearance of having been impressed into the posse; then at the tail end of the procession came Farmer Trotter, carrying an old musket that may have done duty in the Civil War, half a century back, for it looked like a fossil.

"Gosh!"

That was Lil Artha "letting off steam," as he would have termed it; but he uttered his favorite expression so very low that there was not the slightest danger of it's being overheard.

"Don't wink an eyelash if you can help it, fellows," whispered Elmer, who apparently, for reasons of his own, did not want the posse to know of their presence so near by.

Of course, the others instantly knew what he meant, and if they had been made of stone it is doubtful whether they could have maintained a more rigid attitude as they crouched there in the bushes.

Fortunately, all of the posse seemed to be looking ahead. Perhaps they had been warned by the bound boy that the place to which he was taking them was not very far distant, which would account for their eagerness.

So they passed on. Elmer kept whispering to his followers not to make a move unless it was to drop down flat on their faces. Apparently, not

even Landy felt inclined to do this. As long as the Chief and his gallant posse remained in sight everyone crouched there and took it out in staring.

Then when even Farmer Trotter had been swallowed up in the scrub, sighs might have been heard arising from some of the boys' lips, as though they were relieved to have the suspense ended.

"Never glimpsed us!" remarked Mark, triumphantly.

"Blind as bats in the day-time!" added Landy.

"They didn't happen to turn this way," said Elmer; "and since you all kept so still I don't believe they'd have noticed us even if they had looked. I want to say it was well done, boys."

"That was Johnny Spreen, wasn't it?" asked Landy, as though he wanted to have someone corroborate what his own eyes had told him.

"It certainly was," said Lil Artha. "The farmer wouldn't let him come with us, but I guess the Chief just swore them both into his posse, and then they had to come or run up against the law. A sheriff or a police Chief can do that, you understand; no matter whether a man wants to serve or not, he's got to."

"And you all noticed, I reckon," remarked Chatz, "that they were making straight fo' the hide-out where Hen and that man spent the night. That shows Johnny must have figured out after we left him that it would be a good place for hiding. What do you all say about it?"

"Oh! there's no question but what you're cor-

rect, old top!" Lil Artha told him in his queer way. "But I'm real tickled because Elmer didn't take a notion to hail the Chief, and take him in on our deal."

Elmer laughed at that.

"It wasn't any 'Hail to the Chief' this time, you see, Lil Artha," he remarked. "We have borne the heat and burden of the day, and it wasn't right that that crowd, coming in at the tail end of the chase, should share alike with us. Besides, you remember we decided we wanted to get at poor Hen *before* the law could lay a hand on him."

"So we did," muttered Chatz.

"But Elmer," objected Toby, "supposing they get to that place, and find the birds flown, don't you reckon they'll notice that we've been there?"

"So far as the Chief and his men go," returned the other, "I wouldn't believe them capable of finding out anything except that the camp was empty. But all the same I suppose they will know about us."

"Meaning that Johnny will see our tracks, and read the story there; is that it, Elmer?" queried Lil Artha, quick to catch on to the meaning of the patrol leader's words.

"Yes, Johnny will tell, because he's been hunting furs so long that he knows a heap about following tracks. When he finds out there were a lot of boys in the camp he'll guess we discovered the place."

"Mebbe they'll take it for granted we caught

the birds, and be ready to throw up the game then and there?" suggested Toby.

"Hardly that," advised Elmer; "Johnny ought to be able to tell them different. He would soon learn after looking things over that all our tracks were made *after* those of the man, when we left the camp. You see that must tell him we were pursuing the fellow. I put myself in Johnny's place; and that's how I believe I'd figure it out."

"A good way to do, too, believe me," said Mark.

"Then in that case," Lil Artha continued, "they'll be coming along after us before a great while. Whew! if this doesn't beat anything I ever took part in. It's a continuous procession, boys, winding in and out through the high lands of old Sassafras Swamp—first Hen and the man who controls his actions; then seven bold scouts of the Wolf Patrol; and finally our big puffball of a Chief and his valiant posse bringing up the rear."

"But we don't want them to overtake us, do we?" asked Landy, actually meaning to hint that they had better be moving on, which was a remarkable thing to enter the head of the Smith boy, always the first to desire a halt.

"We do not," Lil Artha informed him, plainly, "and to prevent such a horrible catastrophe from happening we expect to be on the jump again right away, doubling our pace it may be, Landy. The worst is yet to come, remember."

"Huh! you can't scare me any, Lil Artha," the fat scout told his tormentor; for he knew very well

that with a trail to follow they could hardly proceed any more rapidly than before.

Progress was immediately resumed. They went forward in about the same manner as before, with Mark keeping Landy company at the tail-end of the procession. The situation was now growing more and more serious, and much depended on whether they could manage to overtake the fugitives before night came on. A whole day's tramping through the intricate recesses of the swamp, just as the dry land afforded footing, was a monumental task that must try the nerve of the best of them; and Landy, if not one or two others, would be apt to drop out of the ranks long before sunset came.

Elmer, however, was hopeful that they must overtake those they chased long before such utter weariness seized upon them. He knew that Hen Condit himself, although no weakling, could not stand hours upon hours of continual walking, especially when it consisted of such uncertain footing as fell to their portion under those conditions.

Complete exhaustion then might compel Hen to beg his companion to either leave him or else order a halt. One way or the other suited the scouts just as well, so long as they overtook Hen.

When Landy found that he was puffing from his exertions he took an extra grip on himself and would not listen to Lil Artha when the tall scout proposed that he drop out.

"All you have to do is to squat where we leave you, Landy," the other had told him in a wheed-

ling way; "and after we're done our business we'll sure promise to look you up again, won't we, Elmer?"

"Nothing doing," snapped Landy, decisively; "what d'ye take me for, Lil Artha, to desert my poor chum Hen when he needs help so much? I'm a sticker I want you to know. Adhesive plasters haven't got anything on me when it comes to standing by you through thick and thin. No use wasting your breath; save it for your work, say I!"

"Let him be, Lil Artha," said the patrol leader, hardly knowing whether it was fidelity to a fellow-scout in distress that influenced Landy, or a dreadful fear lest he find himself left alone in the midst of the dismal swamp.

"Why yes," added Mark, "Landy is doing all right, even if he does wheeze more'n is good for him. But he hasn't stumbled more than six times in the last half hour, which is some record for Landy, you understand, follows."

Apparently, Landy took this as a great compliment, for his perspiring face was set in a grin of triumph as he thrust out his tongue at Lil Artha, as much as to say:

"See, Mister Smarty, others appreciate my good qualities if you don't. So just mind your own business, and leave me alone to attend to mine. I'll get there or burst a blood-vessel trying. That's the Smith nature every time."

Having heard Landy talk in this strain many a time the rest of the scouts could easily put these

expressions in his mouth, though he was too short of breath just then to give them utterance; looks, however, often count more than mere words.

They had been making splendid progress all this while, and must have covered considerable distance since the time when they watched the official posse wind its way past their hiding-place.

Lil Artha and Elmer had once or twice held a low consultation after making an examination of the tracks they were following.

The others, listening to what the leaders said, found they were comparing notes, and that it appeared to be the opinion of both Hen was getting pretty tired. This they could make out in various ways known to scouts who had made a business of reading the story to be found in tracks.

"You can see how uneven Hen walks most of the time," said Lil Artha; "he wobbles even worse than Landy here, which goes to show he's getting pretty tuckered out. Can you blame the poor fellow when p'raps he's weak from hunger? If any of us had to go without a bite to eat all day we'd get wobbly on our pins, too."

There was no dissenting voice raised to this assertion; eating is so essential to the average boy that nothing on earth can compensate for a dearth of food at the regular intervals.

"Then we saw several places where Hen had sat down to rest, you remember," Elmer reminded the other.

"Yes, and the last time it struck us both that the man had yanked him to his feet again by main

force; which I take it wasn't as nice and kind of that bully as you might expect," Lil Artha went on to say.

"Oh! the coward!" Chatz was heard to growl, and the look on his face as he said those few words told what he meant to do if ever the opportunity came his way to strike a blow for the abducted chum.

Filled with renewed determination after this little conference, they once more took up their task. Lil Artha likened their progress to the ways of the Siberian wolf that follows its quarry day and night until in the end its very persistence wins the victory.

"We're in this to the finish," he was fond of saying whenever he had the chance, "and sooner or later we'll get him. The boys of the Wolf Patrol mean to stick to their name, and run the prey to the earth. He just can't get away nohow. All we've got to do is to keep moving, and believe the game is going to come our way. Everybody put his best foot forward again. It's for the honor of the patrol, boys, that we get hold of Hen Condit before the Chief takes him in."

It was now two hours and more since they had started on this new trail. Before this time no doubt the posse must have reached the deserted hide-out, and learned that the birds had flown. Yes, it was even possible that they were coming along the plain trail the seven scouts had left behind them.

Figuring then that the bulky Chief and his men

would not exceed their own rate of progress, they could count on almost two full hours' advantage over the others. That surely ought to be an abundance of time in which to carry out their plans, granting that they could overtake the fugitives.

Elmer had again cautioned them to keep still. The swamp was very silent where they now found themselves, and sounds could be carried to some distance under such conditions.

Landy was getting on fairly well, considering a number of things that he had to contend with. Indeed, Elmer meant to tell him as much when he had the chance; for he felt that the stout scout deserved encouragement. What might seem trifles to some of the others assumed the aspect of mountains in the eyes of one who was not gifted with agility by Nature, and had to carry a far greater weight with him than any of his mates were obliged to.

But here was Lil Artha coming to a full stop again. Looking at him the others found that the tracker did not seem to be bending over to examine the trail more closely, as had occurred many times before.

On the contrary, Lil Artha was now raising his head in an expectant attitude. Landy even conjectured that he must be observing a woodpecker boring a hole in some rotten tree-top, and was about to try and follow the supposed line of vision on the part of Lil Artha when he heard him say something.

It was only a brief sentence, but it meant worlds to those tired trail followers.

"I smell smoke—wood smoke at that!" was what Lil Artha hissed, as he continued to sniff vigorously.

CHAPTER XV

WOLF PATROL PLUCK WINS

It was no time for talking, and everyone realized that fact. If they were close enough to the fugitives to catch the scent of burning wood, the camp could not be far away.

Elmer and Lil Artha seemed to hit upon the same idea at the same time. They took note of the prevailing direction of the wind, and guessed that the fire must be in the quarter from which it was blowing. That was not exactly straight ahead, but a little to the left.

Making motions to indicate extreme caution, Elmer led the way. Now was the time for the scouts of the Wolf Patrol to prove the value of their education. Many times in the past had they practiced this very same difficult feat of creeping up on the camp of an unsuspecting enemy, just as a bunch of red Indians might do; and what they had learned under those conditions was going to prove of practical value to them now.

No one tried to hurry. What was the use, when those they followed had come to a halt, and there was no longer any need of haste?

So they went on yard by yard, straining their

vision all the while in hopes of glimpsing the column of smoke, or the crackling flames ahead. In making this advance they were careful to creep along as close to the ground as possible. This was an easy matter for a thin fellow like Lil Artha, but to stout Landy it was quite a different task, though he succeeded in flattening himself out wonderfully well, all things considered.

When finally smoke was discovered, their caution increased, if such a thing were possible. Fortunately, the nature of the ground proved favorable to such work as creeping, there being a certain amount of grass that might be used to conceal their movements.

Pretty soon those in the advance could catch sight of a figure seated on the edge of the bank at a place where the water extended. Back of him the fire smouldered, as though feeding on wood that had been thrown upon it some time before.

It was Hen Condit!

Imagine the thrill that passed through Elmer, Lil Artha and those other fellows when they made this out to be a fact. Pretty soon as they looked they saw that the missing chum seemed to be engaged in industriously fishing, for he had a rude rod in his hand, and baited his hook with some worms even as they watched.

His back was turned toward them, so there was no opportunity for the newcomers to open negotiations with the fellow-member of the Wolf Patrol even should they want to.

And now stretching their necks a trifle more

they made another discovery. The man in the case was lying on his back, and so far as they could tell, sound asleep. Apparently, the master could take things easy and rest himself, but the slave must keep constantly employed trying to take in something calculated to satisfy their hunger.

It made Lil Artha grind his teeth when he saw this; and Elmer had to touch him on the arm, as well as shake his head sternly in order to warn him that nothing desperate must be attempted. With victory almost in their grasp they would, indeed, be foolish to ruin things by too much haste.

As motions must from this time on take the place of speech, Elmer began to make use of a beckoning finger to tell the others what their next move should be. This, of course, was a further advance. They must contrive in some way to push closer to the camp, so that when the crisis came, they would be in a position to thwart any move the man might make looking to carrying Hen off with him.

All this had been arranged beforehand, and each fellow knew exactly what part he was to play in the round-up. Lil Artha and Chatz had, indeed, been warned that it would be up to them to make sure Hen did not run away, filled with a fear of the consequences should he be taken, even by his friends.

Advancing in this careful fashion, the scouts had covered many yards, and were now almost within striking distance of the camp. It was at

this particular moment that a sudden thing happened calculated to bring matters to a climax.

After all that patient waiting, and rebaiting of his hook, the persistence of the fisherman with the crooked rod was rewarded. He was seen to give a quick jerk, and then with a mighty effort throw a fairly large, shining fish over his head.

No sooner had it landed with a thump on the ground, and commenced to flop furiously, than Hen gave vent to a cry of delight, such as any hungry boy might utter when he found himself favored with a chance to break his long fast.

The sleeping man jumped to his feet as though at first he thought the police had found them out. Seeing the excited boy and the flopping fish, he hurried over to the spot. His first act was to strike poor Hen over the head, and tell him to get busy again if he wanted a bite to eat for himself, because there was only enough in that fish to take the edge off one person's appetite.

Lil Artha came very nearly upsetting all Elmer's plans when he saw this brutal act of the man, for he started to gain his feet, and had to be pulled down by violence, shivering with excitement.

Hen had gone back to his task again, looking thoroughly cowed and disheartened. The man, taking the fish in his hand, held it up as if to admire its looks; then he stepped down to the water as though meaning to clean the prize without any loss of time, possibly spurred on by hunger.

Elmer again began to advance a foot at a time,

meanwhile keeping close watch on all that was going on ahead. They had the situation well in hand, their line covering the ground, with the water cutting off escape in one quarter.

Even without those serviceable guns the seven boys might have proven themselves master of the game, for clubs could serve in lieu of better weapons. As it was, Elmer felt positive things must go their way.

Just then, Hen, in turning to reach his supply of bait, chanced to see that line of creeping figures in khaki. The mingled expressions that crossed his face told what a flutter the sight must have brought to his heart.

Elmer instantly put a finger on his lips, and made a gesture warning Hen not to betray them. Perhaps it was just as well, for the poor fellow seemed on the point of crying out in his mixture of joy and fear. He did succeed in making some sort of sound that attracted the attention of the man, who raised his head to growl:

"What ails you now, you young fool? I'm almost sorry I went to the bother of trying to save you from the clutch of the law. What are you complaining about, I'd like to know? Get another fish, if you expect to stave off your hunger; the first of the spoils always goes to the boss."

"I caught my finger on the hook, that's all, Joe," stammered Hen, perhaps telling the truth, too, for in his sudden shock of excitement at seeing his chums he could very well have done such a thing.

"Well, suck it, and get busy doing your work, that's all, while I cook this fish, and perhaps another you may take. Yes, and while you're about it just pray that my appetite will be stayed with this one; for if it isn't, you'll have a small chance for a bite unless they come in faster than they've been doing."

Well, the crisis had passed, and there had been no discovery; but then Elmer was really caring very little now. He only wanted to post his backers a shade better so as to cut off all chance of escape, when he intended opening up the game himself by springing a surprise on the man.

One thing he did mean to look out for, and this was a possible move on the part of the escaped jail bird to lay hold of Hen. Such a man would think first of all how he could use the boy for a shield, while he made terms with the enemy. It was an old trick, which Elmer had known to be used with more or less success when up on that Canadian cattle ranch, where bad men were occasionally met with, who gave lots of trouble before they were rounded up.

Two, three minutes passed.

Elmer did not believe it would be good policy for them to continue to advance any further. He did not wish to get so close to the man that the other could by a sudden rush reach them before they were able to do anything.

By a low hiss he warned his comrades that the critical time had arrived, when every scout would be expected to do his duty.

Then slowly he got up, first on his knees, and then on his feet. Every fellow duplicated his move, so that the entire seven were now standing there, forming a line slightly inclined to resemble the new crescent moon.

And there was Hen Condit turning his head around to stare at them, his face as white as the chalk they were accustomed to use upon the blackboard in school. His eyes were as round as circles, while upon his strained countenance hope, fear, expectation, almost a dozen emotions struggled for the mastery.

"Hello! Joe!" called out Elmer, without the slightest warning.

Up rose the head of the man who was busy cleaning the fish. When he saw those seven khaki-clad figures standing there, with two shotguns bearing directly on his person, he was to all appearances struck dumb for the moment. His eyes stared and his mouth fell open. Fish and knife dropped from his nerveless hands.

"Caught, by thunder! and by a bunch of boys at that!"

These words burst from his lips, after which he started to use some pretty strong language until Elmer put his foot down sternly.

"Stop that kind of talk, Joe!" he ordered. "We've got you rounded up, and there's no use kicking. If you make a move to run, or jump this way, we'll fill you full of bird-shot, do you hear?"

"Both barrels in the bargain, Joseph, mind you!" added Lil Artha, still burning with indig-

nation as he recollected how they had seen the beast cuff poor Hen; and perhaps deep down in his boyish heart actually hoping the other might take a notion to try and get away, when they would be justified in peppering him, after he had run possibly thirty or forty yards.

"Oh! I guess the jig's all up with me, boys," said the man, with a look of sheer disgust on his face. "I've had a little run for my money, but the stone jug seems to be yawning for me. I was a fool to bother with the kid, it seems; but when the scheme came to me at first I thought it too fine to drop. Here's where I get paid for being a silly gump. What do you want me to do, boys? I'll obey with as much cheerful alacrity as I can, seeing that I'm starving to death just now."

"First of all," said Elmer, who had it all mapped out, "lie down on your face and put both hands behind you. We're going to tie you up, and wait for the Chief with his posse to come along. Do you get that, Joe?"

"Sure I do, and since it's Hobson's choice with me here goes. I suppose you fellows must be Boy Scouts. I once organized a troop of the same, but never dreamed I'd be arrested by the khaki crowd. It's all in a day's work, though."

He, accordingly, stretched himself flat on the ground. When they could see that he had his hands held behind his back, and conveniently crossed at the wrists, four of the boys advanced.

"Keep your gun aimed at him, Lil Artha," commanded the scout-master, "and if he tries any

funny business let him have it in the legs. Here, Landy, you and Chatz sit on him while I secure his hands."

The man attempted no resistance, for he realized the folly of it. He did groan, however, when Landy squatted down on his legs, and the other fellows could hardly blame him for grunting. It was like a thousand of brick dropping from a second story building," as Lil Artha afterwards described it.

The job was quickly and neatly dispatched, Elmer wrapping his cord many times around the wrists of the prisoner. By this time Joe seemed to have recovered his nerve, and made out to consider the whole thing more in the light of a big joke than anything else.

Meanwhile, there was Hen standing near by, and hardly knowing whether to look delighted at seeing his cruel boss thus being tied up, or show the dreadful fear that was gripping his soul as he contemplated what must follow.

"Cheer up, Hen, old fellow," said Toby, stepping over to grasp his hand; but to his amazement Hen immediately broke down, and began to sob as if his heart were broken.

"You don't know the worst, that's what," he said, plaintively. "That stealing the money from my uncle was bad enough, but oh! will they really hang me for the other? I sure didn't mean to do such a terrible thing when I threw that stone and hit the tramp that day! I've had no peace of mind ever since he told me his pal had really died.

He said he'd keep still about it if I'd go with him, and do everything he told me to. And I've just had to, even when I felt sick enough to want to lay me down and die."

"What's this yarn you've been giving the boy, Joe?" demanded Elmer, sternly, as he faced the man, who with his hands tied behind his back had been propped up against a convenient tree.

The man looked at Elmer and then burst into a derisive laugh.

"I knew he was a soft subject when I met him that day," he said, "and I made up my mind I'd work him for fair. He did throw a stone and hit a fellow I was with on the head. We chased after him but he was too speedy for us. Later on when I was all alone I set up that slick game on him, telling him my pal had actually died, and I'd buried him in the woods. Oh! it was almost too easy. He did just whatever I wanted him to. You'll find every cent of the money in my pocket, because I never had a ghost of a chance to spend any of it. That's all, son. Now you understand what ails the silly fool."

Hen Condit had listened to this, at first with that look of abject pain on his face. Then as the substance of the man's confession dawned upon his mind he began to exhibit fresh interest that caused another expression, that of wild hope, to swiftly take the place of despair on his countenance.

"Oh! do you mean then, Joe, that your pal didn't die after all? Please, oh please, tell me

that, and I'll forgive you for everything mean you've done to me!" he begged.

"The last I saw of the tramp," the prisoner told him, "he was settled in an empty freight car, and bound for the city. He was as frisky as ever then. I'd have joined him only I didn't want to pull up broke in the city; and I thought there ought to be some rich pickings for a clever crook around these regions. That's where I made my one big mistake. And now I'm going to take my medicine. That's all from me, you hear. Only I say, kid, you're lucky to have such a fine lot of chums to help you out of a bad scrape!"

CHAPTER XVI

CONCLUSION

"I CAN hardly believe it's true," muttered Hen Condit, helplessly, as he looked around him at the beaming faces of his seven loyal chums; "just seems to me as if I'd wake up and find it only a lovely dream."

"Well, it isn't, just the same, Hen," said Lil Artha, as he wrung the other's cold hand as though it had been a pump handle, and he the honest milkman; "the money's been recovered, every cent of it, and like as not there's some sort of a reward out for the recapture of this gent here, who broke jail with a pair of handcuffs on his wrists which he filed off weeks ago up in this same swamp. And if there is, you share with us in that, Hen, remember."

"But I didn't do a single thing to get him, and that wouldn't be fair!" weakly protested the relieved boy, with his arm linked in that of Elmer, upon whom he seemed to lean in this dreadful crisis of his young life.

"Didn't hey?" snorted Toby; "I guess you *lured him along;* then again and helped to blind his eyes while we crept noiselessly closer and

closer. Sure you deserve part of the reward, Hen, providing there is any up."

At hearing that unique remark, the prisoner burst into a hearty laugh. Evidently, "Joe," having made up his mind that he was going back to the clutches of the law, could enjoy a good joke as well as the next one; he was undoubtedly a reckless sort of fellow anyway.

"That's fine for you, son," he told Toby; "luring the rascal on is a good one. That poor kid was almost too easy for me to work, for he fell into my trap as soon as I pulled the string. Why, I felt ashamed of myself sometimes, it was so much like taking candy from the baby. But he isn't a half bad sort of a boy; and let's hope this'll be a lesson to him never again to throw stones at poor tramps. They're human as well as the rest of us, and have their feelings. That lump on his head pained Weary Willie Larkins as much as it would have done Hen here."

Having made sure that the desperate character whom they only knew as Joe could not escape, the boys built a jolly fire, and proceeded to cook something. Hen was so savagely hungry they had to lead him away while the meal was in preparation, for he vowed he was dreadfully tempted to jump in and devour his food raw.

And when a supply had been made ready, the scouts did not forget to feed their prisoner, who certainly seemed to enjoy it very much, indeed.

"You boys are a great bunch," he told Lil Artha, who was looking after his necessities in the

line of food; "and after all, I'm not sorry you were the ones to get me, if it had to be. I'd never forgive myself if that fat Chief of Police down at Hickory Ridge managed to round me up, and him as ignorant about following a trail as a greenhorn."

You see, before then the man had guessed that Elmer must have spent some time Out West, from various things he heard mentioned. Indeed, he had asked plainly if such were not the case, and afterwards told the young scout-master a few interesting things connected with his own checkered career.

His real name he declared would never be known, for he came of a good family, which he would not wish to disgrace. He admitted that he had had every chance in the world to make a mark in the line of law or the ministry, and had even been a professor at one time in a college; but, somehow, a love for dissipation dragged him down until finally he had disappeared, assumed another name in a part of the country where he was not known, and commenced his career of vice.

The man told the scouts to take a lesson from his blasted career, though they hardly knew whether he really meant it or, as Lil Artha was constrained to say, was "talking through his hat."

The fire was kept burning, and fed with more or less green wood in the hope and expectation that the black smoke thus generated might draw the tracking posse to the scene the more rapidly.

It was almost two hours before they arrived,

which would indicate that Johnny might not be quite as expert at following a "man trail" as some of the scouts were.

Great was the astonishment of the Chief and his men when upon approaching the fire by creeping up they discovered that those about it were the eight scouts, and even recognized in the bedraggled figure of the last member none other than the wretched culprit, Hen Condit.

And there, seated with his back against a tree and his hands and ankles securely bound scout-fashion, was the man they wanted. He greeted their coming, and the look of amazement on the Chief's red face with roars of amusement.

"Better late than never, Chief," he called out. "While you were sleeping over it, these smart scouts did the business, and took me in. All the cold cash that was taken has been recovered to a last red cent; and I've explained just how I forced this silly boy Hen to write that letter, when it was really me who cribbed the money. So don't bother blaming a kid like that. He's had his lesson, Chief."

Elmer thought that was pretty handsome of Joe, and he did not hesitate to tell him so. He could see that the man was a strange mixture of good and evil, though it seemed that the bad elements in his composition were generally on top.

As there was no need of remaining any longer in the swamp, they started to leave. Johnny said he would go back and take the two skiffs out, tow-

ing one behind him. Later on he could come and mend the new boat by fetching a plank to replace the one that had been staved in by striking a log at full speed.

"Hope we see you again down at Hickory Ridge, Johnny!" called out Lil Artha after the bound boy.

"Yes, and we won't forget that clever chicken trap of yours," added Toby, "even if the man did cut his companion free before we reached the spot. By the way, Hen, here's something of yours that we found."

"My knife with the buckhorn handle!" exclaimed the Condit boy, looking pleased. "I missed that, and thought I'd never see it again. Where did you pick it up, Toby?"

"Huh! you dropped it from your pocket once upon a time when your heels were some higher than your head. That helped to give us a strong clue, and we knew we were on the right track up here near old Sassafras Swamp. Next time you're chicken hungry, Hen, button up your pockets; you never know what's going to happen these days."

Hen turned fiery red, and then laughed in a confused fashion.

"Well," he said, boldly, "both of us were terribly hungry, and since I'd jumped in up to my neck you know, an inch further didn't seem to mind. I suppose that's the way with all boys who go to the bad; the first step leads to another until they don't care much what becomes of them. But oh! I'm hugging myself to know it's all going to

be like an ugly dream now. What don't I owe you fellows? All my life I'll remember it."

Once out of the swamp and they were soon at Farmer Trotter's place. Here it was found that the Chief and his posse had come in a big touring car that just held the party comfortably, though there would still be room for Joe, of course.

The boys were invited to pile in and hang on; but respectfully declined. A ride of so many miles to the home town, going at a fast pace over a bumpy road, and hanging on outside the car in the bargain, did not seem to have any great attractions for them.

"We prefer to take our time, and use the big wagon, Chief," said Elmer after consulting with his seven chums; "like as not half-way there we'll make camp and have a jolly night of it, arriving home before sundown again."

"Pleath tell our people we're on the way, and expect to turn up thooner or later," added Ted Burgoyne.

"And Chief, you promised to let my uncle know the whole story, remember," called out the contrite Hen Condit. "I'll be ashamed to face him, but perhaps he won't be so *very* angry when he hears how I was deceived so terribly, and made to believe I had actually killed that tramp when I threw the stone. And my aunt loves me, that I know. Don't forget to tell them every cent has been recovered from the thief, and that I'm bringing it back with me."

The scouts did camp that night in a wood along-

side the road. Fortunately, the weather proved very kind to them. Lil Artha said the "wind was tempered to the shorn lamb," by which he undoubtedly meant that since they had neither tents nor blankets it considerately did not turn cold, nor were they caught out in a heavy rain storm.

Their last outing of the vacation season had proved to be a fine one. They had passed through a novel experience when exploring the depths of the mysterious Sassafras Swamp; and better still had managed to save their poor, mistaken comrade from a fate, the very thought of which would often make him shiver even when months and years had crept by.

They had a great night of it there in camp. Even Hen tried to forget for a time what he must face on the morrow, and joined his chums in their songs, as they sat cross-legged around the cheery blaze.

There was no longer any necessity for suppressing their boyish exuberance, for the gloomy swamp had been left behind, nor was there any hiding escaped criminal to take alarm. So they laughed and talked and sang to their hearts' content; nor did the sleepiest of them, meaning Landy, of course, get a chance to lay his head on his make-believe pillow until nearly midnight.

"What's the use of wasting so much time in sleeping?" Lil Artha had demanded, when the stout boy pleaded for them to desist, and give him a chance to get some rest; "this is going to be our very last camp until away off in Thanksgiving

week, even if we have one then. So let's make the most out of it. You c'n sleep any old time, and lie abed till ten on Sunday, if you want to. Now for another song, fellows, and Landy, we want your fine tenor to help out, remember."

The morning found them astir, and after breakfast the horses were once more put to the pole so that a start could be made for home.

None of them were in a hurry, and it was really about the middle of that afternoon when the expedition entered town. The news had, of course, been widely circulated, and everybody was on tiptoe, filled with excitement, and watching for their arrival.

A great crowd had collected to greet them, and there was the brass band of which Hickory Ridge was getting to be quite proud, playing a sonorous tune which some of the scouts believed must be "Lo! the Conquering Hero Comes," though none of them felt quite sure of it.

Well, Hen Condit was forgiven by his uncle, after he heard all about the terrible time the boy had, and in what way unscrupulous "Joe" deceived the foolish boy. Elmer and his chums made it a point to see that the story was widely circulated, and the balance of the scout troop aided to the best of their ability, for Hen was well liked.

The consequence of all this was that most people decided the boy had already been sufficiently punished, and that his lesson was apt to be of lasting benefit to him during the balance of his natural life. Besides, it gave shrewd fathers and

mothers a fine moral lesson to hold up before their own erring youngsters, and hence for a long time to come the narrow escape which Hen Condit had had from going wholly to the bad was used as a means of correction. In this way it doubtless did much good, if that could be of any satisfaction to Hen.

No doubt there will be other stirring events come up, with mysteries to be solved, as the Hickory Ridge Boy Scouts pursue their activities; and should such interesting happenings take place, be sure they will not escape our notice. Until then we must say good-bye to the faithful readers who have accompanied us through the stirring adventures that befel our young friends in Sassafras Swamp.

THE END

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